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MIRRORS OF THE SELF: THE MYTH OF NARCISSUS
IN THE MONOLOGUES OF SPALDING GRAY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
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* * * *

The Ohio State University
1996

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ABSTRACT

In Ovid's retelling of the Narcissus myth in Book III of Metamorphoses, Tiresias prophesies that the infant Narcissus will have a long life, provided "he shall himself not know." Centuries later, American monologist Spalding Gray performs self-reflexive material in what he has described as an attempt "to tell the story in order to heal myself through the telling . . . to make sense of it." This study examines the autobiography-based novel and selected performance monologues of Spalding Gray as illuminated by the myth of Narcissus as told by Ovid. The onstage persona of Spalding Gray, performed by a man named Spalding Gray, deals with contemporary issues and dilemmas which reflect our current society's narcissism. Elements of the Narcissus myth such as water imagery, mirrors and reflection, attraction to an other, and struggles related to a sense of a cohesive self surface in Gray's works as they provide a context for the perception of his works as a reflection of the cultural climate. Theorists such as Christopher Lasch (The Culture of Narcissism and The Minimal Self) Alice Miller (The Drama of the Gifted Child), D. W. Winnicott (particularly his theory of the mirroring mother) and others help illustrate that mythic elements, as part of a "collective unconscious," surface symbolically in literature, and in particular in the works of Spalding Gray. Gray's monologues (and his novel, a monologue by virtue of its first-person narrative and
basis in autobiographical events) reflect more than the concerns of a protagonist
wrestling with issues of the self. Indeed, the works are profound explorations of a
narcissistic culture.
Dedicated to the Memory of my Mother

Bernadine M. Conrad

29 September 1922 - 17 April 1996
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In Ovid's retelling of the Narcissus myth in Book III of *Metamorphoses*, Tiresias prophesies that the infant Narcissus will have a long life provided "he shall himself not know." Centuries later, American monologist Spalding Gray performs self-reflexive material in what he describes as an attempt "to tell the story in order to heal myself through the telling-you know, how to try to make sense of it" (Gray, "Meet our Newest Interviewer" 3). Though Narcissus was looking into the pool longingly, trapped in an unrequited love for a beautiful image he did not recognize as himself, Gray's persona examines his life knowingly in search of a self, a significant difference in motivation for someone who is similarly trapped. Narcissus is already immobilized, unresponsive to the plaintive, adoring call of Echo. Gray's character, in all of his monologues, is looking deeply into the pool to avoid the fatality of being trapped. By performing monologues which are intensely autobiographical and dealing with very personal issues of introspection and anxiety, Spalding Gray pursues a knowledge of the self, much like the intense gaze of Narcissus into the murky water in pursuit of the compelling image. Gray writes candidly about his own epic struggles with fear, anxiety, sexuality, the loss of his mother, and his own nervous
breakdown. For a culture wrestling with such strongly related challenges, Gray speaks as a kind of Everyman, a fellow traveller alongside us on the perilous road through life, a friendly companion who helps us see the humor in our predicament and distracts us from our terror.

To link Spalding Gray with the Narcissus of the Greek myth is not to call him a "narcissist," though it is accurate to say that Gray writes and performs material which explores narcissistic issues. There is an important distinction, for "narcissism" has somewhat misleadingly come to be understood to mean "self-absorption." In dealing with narcissistic dilemmas, "narcissism" is more appropriately used to signify either the personality disorder, examined so eloquently by Alice Miller in her 1994 *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (and many others, tracing their work back to Freud's classic essay "On Narcissism") or a pattern of self-absorption evidenced by the worshipping of youthfulness and the glorification of image. Spalding Gray's protagonist connects with audiences because he candidly critiques our culture. He understands what it is to fight for psychic survival in a world which bombards us with daily assaults on the self.

Christopher Lasch, in his classic 1978 indictment of American society, *The Culture of Narcissism*, points out that the term has come to mean vanity or mere self-interest and traces this misuse of the term to Erich Fromm's *The Heart of Man*, wherein the term was "drained" of its' clinical meaning to cover all its' "expanded forms" to mean the antithesis of "love for humanity" (31). To use "narcissism" in that way to describe Gray's work would be to do him an incredible disservice, for in
addition to the application of the term in a pejorative sense, it would be an extremely simplistic categorization of his complex and original contribution to autoperformance. Instead, it is more useful to examine the self-reflexive works of Spalding Gray in light of the Narcissus myth; he is a writer/performer whose first-person narratives explore narcissistic dilemmas and connect to a narcissistic future, which sees itself reflected in his image. It is perhaps the appeal to the collective unconscious of the culture that assures Gray's character his identification, on a personal level, with his audiences.

Much has been written in the fields of literary and dramatic criticism to attest to the power of relating to individuals' desires to connect to their cultures through a shared history, a universal sense of belonging, or a common mythic folklore. Rollo May has addressed this subject in his 1991 study, *The Cry for Myth*. May asserts that it is a distinctly American concept to think in terms of individualism, and contrasts it historically to the Middle Ages (where, he writes, it was "unknown . . . except for hermits") and classical Greece (where he says, it would have been considered "psychotic") (108). Nevertheless, May describes mythology as a way of "making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence" (15). If true, there is then reason to believe that to examine a contemporary writer/performer in light of the resonances connecting the content to ancient mythology is justified, for the questions asked respond to universal dilemmas with which myth deals.

May's chapter "Individualism and Our Age of Narcissism" addresses specially the Narcissus myth and how our culture responds to the concept of self-interest in a
uniquely American manner. Listing Robert N. Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* as a "strong indictment of our overemphasized individualism in America," May approaches the Narcissus myth as reflecting our cultural pattern of survival of the self. According to May, Bellah attributes the nation's concern with individual freedom to the point of self-serving behavior to the historical context of individual rights and personal liberty. Bellah in turn refers to Benjamin Franklin's concept of morality as being focused so "exclusively on individual self-improvement that the larger self context hardly comes into view" (110).

Rollo May agrees with Lasch that narcissistic behavior is "the neurosis of our time," and points out that although Freud and his immediate followers observed and described narcissism, this particular behavior pattern had not become prominent. However, May asserts that, like Lasch, he believes, "especially in America the narcissistic personality has become the dominant type of patient in the decades since the 1960s" (112). According to May, "the narcissistic patient in therapy is the modern myth of lonely individualism. This person has few if any deep relationships and lacks the capacity for satisfaction or pleasure in the contacts he does have" (112). Spalding Gray shapes most of his monologic performances around just such problematic dilemmas. His onstage persona seems to be the spokesperson for the postmodern soul, troubled by sadness and despair and yet triumphant in his battle to maintain an integrated self through the use of humor as a weapon. And his audiences respond knowingly; not only have we been there, we are still there, as immobilized at the pool as Narcissus.
As the author of the definitive work on cultural narcissism, Christopher Lasch argues that the 20 years between 1960 and 1980, with their sometimes violent climates of protest, have shaped the country's personality irrevocably. He asserts, in *The Culture of Narcissism*, that after the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to the pursuit of purely personal preoccupations. In part due to the vastly unpopular Vietnam War, and in part due to domestic crises like the struggle for racial equality and rising economic inflation, Americans developed a sense of nihilism. Believing that they were increasingly powerless to improve their lives or their society in any profound way, they began to believe that what mattered instead was “psychic self-improvement.” Patterns of behavior began to change to reflect this interest in improving the self: health food, physical fitness, Eastern religion and astrology, learning how to “relate” to others, and other pursuits took on a fervor of religious zeal, all to overcome what Lasch has said was a person’s perceived “fear of pleasure.” Now, pleasure was pursued as a justifiable goal in and of itself.

Lasch has observed that the developing philosophy of the American culture became “living for the moment,” which he described as the “prevailing passion” leading to a belief that living “for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity” is an ultimate goal. This environment led to a strong interest in introspection and seeking of the self, what began to be known colloquially as “finding yourself.” Lasch calls this attitudinal climate “a culture of narcissism” based on Freud’s essay, which treated narcissism as “a libidinal investment of the self.” Clearly, Lasch interpreted the aggressive self-analysis and pursuit of self-fulfillment as a type of self-love, even
investing this behavior with sexual overtones. Freud has described the individual who undertakes this type of compulsive self-examination as a fragile self, one who is, in reality, unable to love.

This very obsessiveness with self-knowledge is what has led psychoanalysts, beginning with Freud, to make the connection between the myth and those who are described as having narcissistic personality disorder. Kohut, in his *Analysis of the Self*, says that this obsessive self-analysis is a breakdown in the "cohesive self," Kohut is a term for a healthy individual who has successfully integrated the various developmental splits of personality into a well-functioning whole. Such an individual has a healthy and realistic concept of the self, but one suffering with a narcissistic personality disorder exhibits what he calls evidence of a "grandiose" self, an "un-integrated" personality.

This grandiose self is a distorted sense of personality, in fact a type of dual personality. The narcissist's exhibitionist libido leads to states of uneasy, anxiety-filled elation alternating with periods of painful self-consciousness, shame and hypochondria. At times, the individual will seem utterly consumed by self-concern, and at others will seem unconcerned and fearless. Kohut describes the latter as the ego trying to deny the existence of painful emotions by drawing attention to counterphobic disinterest.

Alice Miller, asserts that narcissistic personality disorders stem from a childhood which did not provide an adequately "mirroring" mother. Miller describes a "mirroring, available mother" as one "who allows herself to be made use of as a
function of the child's development." According to Miller, having such a mother enables the child to develop a "healthy self-feeling," which she says is essentially "the unquestioned certainty that the feelings and needs one experiences are a part of one's self. This certainty is not something one can gain upon reflection; it is there like one's own pulse, which one does not notice as long as it functions normally."

This last statement is significant, for it demonstrates the contrast between a healthy sense of self, and what Lasch has observed of the American preoccupation with the self: self-analysis, self-love, self-satisfaction, self-knowledge, self-improvement. What Lasch observed is that the American culture is (collectively and individually) neurotically self-conscious, and he describes narcissism as "a metaphor of the human condition" (31). Lasch asserts that the advertising industry has established an environment of capitalism, strength for the individual by, among other things, the acquiring of possessions. But, he points out, it is not mere possession of material goods which empowers the individual; it is the sense that the individual is deserving of every good thing.

Theodore Shank, in his book *American Alternative Theatre*, includes Gray in his study as a theatrical writer and performer directly influenced by the country's social and political upheaval of the 1960s and early 1970s. Shank describes "alternative" theatre as a response (and, especially, a rebellion) related to "the theatre of the dominant complacent middle-class society which tended to perpetuate the status quo in its aesthetics, politics, working methods, and techniques" (1).
In further defining American alternative theatre, Theodore Shank explains that in a fundamental way, "all alternative theatre puts the performer more in focus than does conventional realistic theatre" (155). This is largely because the creators of these alternative performances "are themselves the primary focus of their work. Some aspect of self becomes the principal content of their productions as well as the chief material from which the productions are made" (155). This use of the self as content has become one of the most common distinguishing marks of American alternative theatre. Shank calls this the "autonomous method of creation" and explains that at least in part, "the development of this method was a reaction against the psychic fragmentation the artists experienced in the technocratic society which believed that human needs could be satisfied by technical means requiring a high degree of specialization" (3).

In a world quickly growing more and more technology-oriented, the creative artist feels more and more frustrated with an inability to find meaning, and to communicate meaning to an audience. The exploration of the self as text provides an interesting and innovative way to meet these needs. Shank writes, "The two energizing forces of the new theatre--the more energy of social causes and the spirit of artistic exploration--gave rise to two perspectives from which artists viewed human experience" (3). Theatre audiences were ready to see new ideas projected in new forms.

As in the 1960s and 1970s, budgetary concerns of performing artists and producing organizations in the 1990s are significant. Shank points to the economic
climate of the theatre of twenty years ago as actually being quite helpful in creating
an environment which favored the development of avant-garde performance.

According to Shank, the strong tendency of experimental performance to deemphasize
expensive sets and costuming elements (while not de-valuing the importance of
spectacle) in favor of bare stages, minimal use of properties (and the relatively
inexpensive types of materials used) and "real life" clothing used as costuming made
it more possible for producing organizations or independent performers to stage new
works. The cultural climate was already amenable to an anti-establishment lifestyle.

Initially:

it was the new lifestyle which made these theatres an economic
possibility . . . . It was not only acceptable to drop out of the
established culture's university and employment, but it was also
desirable to withdraw the support of one's labor and tuition fees.
It became both a necessity and a badge to live frugally--used
clothing, inexpensive shared housing, food from money
provided by middle-class parents, food stamps, unemployment
benefits, welfare. (Shank 2)

With potential performers, playwrights and other theatre workers choosing to adopt
this type of lifestyle, the burden of theatre experimentation and its related economic
instability was somewhat eased.

Another aspect of alternative theatre as it developed which lessened budgetary
demands was the absence of a script in most works emphasizing the self as text. This
characteristic, which traces its beginnings back to the "happenings" of Allan Kaprow
in the 60s, has remained in the alternative performances of such figures as Spalding
Gray. Gray is noted for his use of a personalized type of improvisation in developing
a performance, and in the actual performances, and for his use of extensive personal
metaphors.
Milly S. Barranger writes that Spalding Gray is also noted for his experimental work which seeks to develop "new strategies for dealing with the content of self-exploration" (446). She also asserts that along with Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, Meredith Monk and Lee Breuer, Spalding Gray is one of "the most successful avant-gardists staging their personal mythologies" (446-447).

Gray, a Stanislavski trained actor, is now most recognized by the theatre public for his autobiographical plays, and as a touring monologist who relates personal history in an improvisational manner. Sid Smith of the Chicago-Tribune has called Gray "quixotic" and indeed his works tend idealistically to portray optimistic views of life in spite of the pain of the past or present. Originally a member of Richard Schechner's Performance Group, Gray began to develop his own view of acting as a reaction to the contradictory philosophies of his training. Gray states that his Stanislavski training had taught him to imagine himself to be someone else, a task he realized he could not feel comfortable doing. Under Schechner's direction, performance was stressed rather than acting, and Gray was more comfortable with Schechner's view that the performer was equally as important as the text, if not more so. This gradually led to Gray's autobiographical performances and an incorporation of Schechner's philosophy of performance.

However, the most significant event which served as a catalyst for Gray's new, autobiography-based text and performances was the suicide of Gray's mother in 1967. The content of most of Gray's work since then can be traced to his trauma at the time of her death, the despair and corresponding struggle to make sense of his life.
in light of his relationship with his mother, and corresponding difficulties related to self-reflection: aging, buying a house, finding and marrying a life partner, exorcising personal demons. His popularity speaks eloquently for the mental and emotional states of our culture. Though they relate to serious problems of identity and the self, sexuality, spirituality and frank discussions of the author's history of psychoanalysis and therapy, and are usually concerned with highly personal experiences (often painful or traumatic in nature) the monologues are also infused with wry, ironic humor. In writing about Gray, Shank writes that he describes himself as "'extremely narcissistic and reflective' [and wanting] to perform using his own actions rather than those of a character outside himself . . . it became a kind of public confession of his reflections" (170).

The exploration of new social ideas (particularly the hippie, civil rights, anti-Vietnam, environmental, feminist and gay/lesbian movements) and the corresponding development of new ways of performing and directing new works toward new audiences created a vibrant, experimental theatre environment. It is significant that these are the same years that Christopher Lasch points to as conducive to the creation of a narcissistic culture. As free speech and the rights of the individual became increasingly powerful subjects of national interest and discussion, together with the growing interest in the ecology of the natural environment and the health and fitness of the personal self, a climate was created which welcomed artists who explored such issues. Spalding Gray's early work directly corresponds to this time in several ways.
The culture was actively engaged in seeking answers to the kinds of ideas Gray was also interested in exploring: anxiety, fear, the self, personal freedom.

Contemporary theatre has now, in the late 1990s, direct connections to the socially and politically turbulent times of the 60s and 70s. It is not mere coincidence that Spalding Gray’s monologic performances are as relevant to audiences now as his early, collaborative work with the Performing Garage and the Wooster Group were to those of several decades ago: as the culture has continued to wrestle with questions related to issues of the self, so has Gray. And in both cases, the self-examination has intensified in response to many factors, including increased anxiety and the struggle to survive spiritually traumatic events.

Since the mid-1980s, development of alternative theatre forms has continued to evolve despite the lessening of budgetary concerns. Although large scale productions such as *Cats*, *Les Miserables*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Miss Saigon* come to mind, there is a strong market at the same time for smaller scale performances which emphasize spectacle less than they explore text, language and social issues. Deborah Geis, in her 1995 *Postmodern Theatrics*, for example, approaches contemporary experimental theatre in the 1990s as a direct outgrowth of the experimental theatre of the 1960s. In tracing the development of the specific theatrical form of autobiography-based monologue, she points out that the element of character undergoes transformation as it allows the performer to blur the line between the fictive and the real. She examines Gray’s monologues particularly as an expression of the crossing of boundaries, both theatrical and personal. This issue along with
motifs such as the struggle between social classes and the search for a self identity
seem to be shared by Broadway superhits like those mentioned above, and by artists
like Spalding Gray, who explore them on a more personal level. Gray, in particular,
provides a connecting link by satirizing show business (and the way it mirrors a
narcissistic culture) in his works.¹

In the Narcissus myth, there are also resonances which directly relate to the
dilemmas experienced by Gray's persona and the culture to which he speaks. The
Narcissus of the ancient myth was a beautiful youth, loved by all who knew him.
The translation of Ovid's telling by A. D. Melville reveals that "many a youth and
many a girl desired him," hinting that the physical beauty of the boy was androgynous
in nature.² Narcissus's mother was Liriope, a "wave-blue water nymph" who had

¹RoseLee Goldberg, in Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present has
addressed the return of big-budget shows as a contributing factor in the development
of a more complex theatrical climate. Her 1988 study posits that "... the return to
traditional fine arts on the one hand and the exploitation of traditional theatre craft on
the other allowed performance artists to borrow from both to create a new hybrid"
(196). She specifically mentions Spalding Gray who seems to be in both worlds,
appearing on the traditional theatre circuit as often as in experimental venues.
Goldberg describes him as an artist who provides "autobiographical tours of
landscapes from his past" (196).

²For this dissertation, Ovid's version of the Narcissus tale as chronicled in Book
III of Metamorphoses is used, in three translations: by Rolfe Humphries, by A.D.
Melville, and in some portions of the study, by Wilmon Brewer. Depending upon the
wording or particular emphasis of the translation, some subtle differences occur in the
three translations. However, they all remain faithful to Ovid's telling of the
Narcissus story. There is another version of the myth which holds that the reflection
Narcissus saw in the water was actually that of his twin sister, lost to Narcissus
through death. Some believe that this sister reflection can be interpreted, in terms of
psychoanalytic theory, as a projection of or substitute for, Narcissus's mother. Otto
Rank explores this interpretation in The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study, in the
chapter "Narcissism and the Double." Because Narcissus's twin sister was dead,
been raped by Cephisus. At the time of his birth, the boy, already beautiful ("from birth adorable") was said to be destined for a long life if, according to the blind seer, "he shall himself not know." This pronouncement gives the Socratic "know thyself" and the philosophical belief that "the unexamined life is not worth living" an ironic twist: here, Narcissus is doomed if he does "know" himself. Spalding Gray's performed character's intense drive to examine his own life, to find answers and "to try to make sense of it" is like the "strange death and stranger love" of Narcissus: trying to "see" becomes the motivating force behind trying to survive.

Another translation of the myth by Rolfe Humphries provides key phrases which can serve as focus points for illuminating Gray's monologues. The telling passages are underlined in the portion of the myth reproduced below. The underlined passages will be used as reference points for following chapters, and will serve, in order, as chapter headings.

There was a pool, silver with shining water,
To which no shepherds came, no goats, no cattle,
Whose glass no bird, no beast, no falling leaf
Had ever troubled. Grass grew all around it.
Green from the nearby water, and with shadow
No sun burned hotly down on. Here Narcissus,
Worn from the heat of hunting, came to rest
Finding the place delightful, and the spring
Refreshing for the thirsty. As he tried
To quench his thirst, inside him, deep within him,
Another thirst was growing, for he saw

Rank uses this version of the myth to illustrate his concept of the double as it is associated with death. This version of the Narcissus myth is chronicled in Louise Vinge's *The Narcissus Theme in Western Literature up to the Early Nineteenth Century* and is studied and quoted in Nathan Schwartz-Salant's *Narcissism and Character Transformation* (especially pages 141-143).
An image in the pool, and fell in love
With the unbodied hope, and found a substance
In what was only shadow. He looks in wonder,
Charmed by himself, spell-bound, and no more moving
Than any marble statue. Lying prone
He sees his eyes, twin stars, and locks as comely
As those of Bacchus or the god Apollo,
Smooth cheeks, and ivory neck, and the bright beauty
Of countenance, and a flush of color rising
In the fair whiteness. Everything attracts him
That makes him so attractive. Foolish boy,
He wants himself; the loved becomes the lover.
The seeker sought, the kindler burns. How often
He tries to kiss the image in the water,
Dips in his arms to embrace the boy he sees there,
And finds the boy, himself, elusive always,
Not knowing what he sees, but burning for it,
The same delusion mocking his eyes and teasing.
Why try to catch an always fleeing image,
Poor credulous youngster? What you seek is nowhere.
And if you turn away, you will take with you
the boy you love. The vision is only shadow,
Only reflection, lacking any substance.
It comes with you, it stays with you, it goes
Away with you, if you can go away. (Humphries 3.410-437.)

The monologues of Spalding Gray fit within the context of a study of a narcissistic culture because the underlying question posed by Gray’s character and the individual in society is the same: "how can fuller understanding of the self satisfy the longing for something other than what I now have?" Lasch insists that narcissistic dilemmas are more than mere self-absorption; the unreachable adored image is the rejecter of the pursuing first self, and this indicates, essentially, the inability of one struggling with such issues truly to love the self. Lasch writes that "love rejected turns back to the self as hatred" (35). If that is true, it is no wonder that a monologist like Spalding Gray receives the favorable attention of the public. His on
stage persona struggles, his dilemmas, his humor despite difficult circumstances, all help us to understand, and therefore come to accept, our selves through our identification with his personal narratives.

Gray's character's obsessive desire to "possess" the self reveals an interest in seeking the reflection of audiences, as well, as a way of reinforcing his sense of identity. In the LA Times interview of April 17, 1994, Gray speaks eloquently of his need for public audiences (and the audience of his longtime companion and director, Renee Shafransky) to reflect aspects of the self for him.

I'm an oral writer and I've evolved all my monologues from the beginning in front of an audience. Because Renee and I have lived together for so long, she has always been around that evolution and I'd always be listening to her feedback--she was a kind of psychic mirror for me . . . . It makes it much more than a solo work. I may be performing but Renee's presence--it is completely interwoven in that performance. I really don't know how I would make a monologue without her. (Gray, "Meet Our Newest Interviewer" 3.)

The fact that Spalding Gray interviews himself for this article, becoming questioner and answerer, adds another dimension to the context, especially in terms of the Narcissus myth. By articulating his need to see himself reflected by others, he is much like Narcissus, gazing into the eyes of a compelling object in order to perceive a response, a reaction to the self. In describing his way of working in this manner, as two identities together communicating the interview content in one article, Gray suggests what is an additional aspect to Narcissus myth imagery: that of the split self, a double.

Basing his way of working (an actor named Spalding Gray who plays a character named Spalding Gray) on his early Stanislavski training combined with
Schechner’s emphasis on "performance" as opposed to "acting," the autobiography-based monologues reinforce a sense of splitting off, of separating into somewhat distilled personae. Gray alludes to this in his self-interview when he says:

I’m the man who sits behind a table and tells true stories from his life. I’m also an actor. I was trained as an actor at Emerson College and I use that training to play myself. With the help of my director, Renee Shafransky, I split myself in two and take the memory of myself in the past and develop that self as a character. For instance, most of the events in my new monologue titled ‘Gray’s Anatomy’ took place two or three years ago. I’m not in that same emotional or physical situation, so like any actor I have to recall and re-create a role. I’m like an introverted Method actor in that way. (3)

Gray points out, at least in one way, an important contrast to Narcissus at the pool. Where Narcissus remains immobilized until he fades away, Gray is able to move on in his own life, moving away in both time and experience from the events related within the narrative.

And yet, in other ways, Gray’s performed persona is still at the same point he has been for many years, because the issues of his life all reflect back to perpetually recurring self-examination. When the Performance Group disbanded in 1980, Gray, Elizabeth LeCompte, Jim Clayburgh, Willem Dafoe, Libby Howes and Ron Vawter formed what became known as the Wooster Group. This early work provided the seminal context for the performances based on Gray’s own experiences. Theodore Shank has described what became Wooster Group trademark performance pieces as "unique autobiographical productions [which were] created using memories and documentary material from the life of Spalding Gray" (170). These pieces were composed in group collaboration (most intensely between Gray and LeCompte) in an
experimentally improvisational manner based on Gray's expressed desire to perform using his own actions rather "than a character outside himself" (170). Shank explains that Gray has always been self-conscious and aware of his everyday actions. He wanted to use these qualities toward creating his own work. As long as he played characters, even if developed through observations of people, he could 'only guess at knowing this other.' He realized he did not want to study others as objects, he wanted to explore himself as other. He no longer wanted to be a character outside himself. He wanted to perform his own actions and be reflective at the same time on stage before an audience. He says it became a kind of 'public confession of this reflectiveness.' It became, 'Look at me. I am one who sees himself seeing himself' (170-171).

Using improvisational techniques he had learned in early days with Richard Schechner and the Performing Garage, Gray developed a trilogy with the collective title Three Places In Rhode Island. These pieces were performed in ensemble with the other members of the Wooster Group. Each piece of the trilogy uses surrealistic images derived from group improvisations and incorporates "more literal material such as recordings and slides of Gray's relatives" (170). Each of the "three places" is named after locations from Gray's childhood, and evoke strong memories of childhood in the audience and performers. Each of the productions "derives from a personal focus [and] invented elements are integrated with the documentary in such a way that there is no clear distinction between the two" (170). Gray says of this work:

This was the new 'play' which I found more interesting, and certainly more immediate because it was going on all the time. I only had to stop it, and look at it, and any number of theatre situations would present themselves. It was learning how to make frames, to frame the mass of reality. I saw this act as composition. I thought of myself as performer/composer because this interplay from which these sets of actions grew did
not necessarily take the form of text but more often took the form of a conglomerate of images, sounds, colors, and movement. (Barranger 40)

Gray's *Rumstick Road, Nayatt School* and *Sakonnet Point* (the individual titles of the trilogy) and *Seven Scenes From A Family Album* are what he calls "rememberings," a way of presenting in performance what the "experience of living has fragmented" (40).

Another aspect of Gray's work is his form of the monologue or "talking pieces" (41). Since 1979, Gray has become well-known on a touring circuit of major cities and universities as a monologist relating, as Gray himself says:

> the archetypical American experiences--love, sex, booze, cars, embarrassing situations. They are recognized by the audience as similar to their own. A kind of catharsis takes place, and an important connection is made between the performer and the spectators. (Shank 179)

Gray calls this "an act of public memory" and was the first to use the terms "self-as-text" or "talking pieces," which he describes as a series of simple actions using improvisations and free associations as building blocks to create a series of images (Barranger 40-41).

Gray says that all of his work has been developed more out of personal need than to entertain an audience. Shank writes that his monologues are a "direct means of thinking through various troubling events in his past" (178). *Rumstick Road*, for example, deals with Gray's acting career, his mother's psychiatric treatment, her Christian Science faith, her illness with cancer, and her subsequent suicide. By relating these experiences to an audience, Gray's persona exorcises negative events
from his life, while at the same time providing catharsis for his audiences. He has expanded artistic theatre media into new areas in order to reach contemporary audiences looking for still newer forms of alternative theatre and the incorporation of new theatre technology.

Ironically, Gray’s search for newer forms with which to reach audiences leads him away from, not to, new technical aspects of theatre technology. Spalding Gray has developed a style of performance monologue unique to conventional theatre: a conversational style of speaking to an audience about some things he has experienced. As he relates these instances, he is seated behind a desk and his only prop is a glass of water, from which he takes frequent sips. He wears casual street clothes rather than a costume, and appears more to be a man simply talking about his real life than an actor portraying another character. His subjects are personal memories.

Ron Jenkins writes, "Spalding Gray is a virtuoso rememberer. He takes raw memory and sculpts it into finely wrought performances of epic autobiography" (Acrobats of the Soul, 124). The memories Gray shares, though sometimes dealing with deep-seated anxieties or even past tragic events, are usually comic in tone. Gray arouses empathy in an audience personally concerned with their own individual related worries: buying a house, dying, aging, trying to accept what life has dealt them. Jenkins writes:

His stories reach the audience through a series of prisms. Gray performs himself remembering himself, as if he were seeing himself in a movie or reading about himself in a newspaper or watching himself on television. His exercises in hyper-autobiography are shaped by the popular media that dominate American society. Gray’s stories reflect collective as well as personal anxieties (124).
The concept of the autobiographical monologue occurred to Gray as an outgrowth of this work with the Wooster Group. The success of these ensemble productions, particularly *Three Places in Rhode Island*, led him to consider the possibility of performing these memories as a monologist. Since much of his work in *Three Places in Rhode Island* was conducted seated at a table, he kept this staging device because it had worked well in earlier performances. Gray says he thinks of himself as

a kind of "poetic reporter," more like an impressionistic painter than a photographer. Most reporters get the facts out as quickly as possible--fresh news is the best news. I do just the opposite. I give the facts a chance to settle down until at last they blend, bubble and mix in the swamp of dream, memory and reflection (123).

As Barranger asserts, the new direction of theatrical experience is preceded by a "new wave . . . led by the performer (rather than by the actor, who pretends to be someone else) whose method is monologue" (462). Even when the solo monologue is not employed often, the self-referential works of performers like Spalding Gray are attractive to those booking performances for economic reasons: one-person and small group performances produced in the characteristically stark manner of the avant-garde naturally cost less. This is especially helpful in situations where, due to the nature of the performance; audience size is smaller because of specialized appeal. Alternative theatre artists, by definition, do not seek to draw the same audiences (size or demographically) as, for example, those producing the Broadway musical. As
discussed earlier, "alternative" theatre artists by definition are usually not interested primarily in the making of big money. Ironically, Spalding Gray addresses this dilemma directly and often in his performance monologues:

In discussing his revision and personalization of his previous formal Stanislavski training, Gray says, somewhere in this process I came to realize that I could only guess at knowing this 'other', I could only pretend. The other person was always a thing, an object. His subjectivity, with its inner freedom, escaped me... 

\[ I \text{ wanted to explore myself as other. } \]

I wanted to investigate my actions. I no longer wanted to pretend to be a character outside myself... The other was the other in me, the constant witness, the constant consciousness of self. (Gray, "About Three Places," 35)

This marked Gray's departure from traditional acting toward content which is self-revelatory. As David Savran writes in Breaking the Rules, "For Spalding Gray, all performance is autobiographical, not because it recreates the performer's past, but because the performer can play only himself, can project only the diversity within" (63). This discovery led to Gray's exploration of the self as text.

In Gray's pursuit of self-revelation, his monologue style has gained shape and focus. Two important influences can be seen in his resultant performance style: Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski. A study of Artaud's "The Theatre of Cruelty" (First Manifesto and Second Manifesto) published in The Theatre and Its Double reveals a distinct similarity to Gray's monologues, particularly in the areas of the Stage/Audition, The Set, Works, The Actor, and what Artaud calls a "transcendent experience of life" (Bently 66). Artaud wrote that a fixed set would be abolished, that there should be "direct staging around themes" and the actor should be the "element of first importance" (63-64). As Gray's monologues later indeed reflect,
Artaud wrote that the themes of theatre should correspond to "the agitation and unrest characteristic of our epoch" (66).

To a perhaps lesser extent, Gray's work has been influenced by Grotowski's concept of a "poor" theatre, freed from unnecessary and cluttering stage sets. In addition to this very basic similarity to the performances of Gray's monologues, there is a deeper relationship of theme. Grotowski, in his "Statement of Principles" (published in Towards a Poor Theatre) wrote about the pace of modern civilization as characterized by "tension, a feeling of doom" and other contemporary stresses. Grotowski felt these themes should be explored in great detail. Gray's monologues also relate to similar modern concerns and frustrations. Performances based on "personal mythologies" and using "the self as text" seem to be an accurate reflection of a social climate characterized by confusion, anxiety, and the struggle for self-awareness.

So, then, it appears that Gray himself has thought of his work in terms of narcissism and self-reflection, but with a difference. Though Gray seems aware that writing about the self and including descriptions relating not only to real events but to real people is perhaps "narcissistic" in that there is interest in the self to a great degree. But he has not spoken publicly of his work in terms of the Narcissus myth, and how other resonances from related mythic elements (namely, Dionysian rite, Oedipal conflict and the story of a peripheral Echo) may come into play, unconsciously, in his work. At least, that is, until now. In a personal interview with Spalding Gray on April 27, 1995, in Columbus, Ohio, Gray expressed agreement that
the myth of Narcissus indeed corresponds to essential aspects of his symbology, and he has not specifically or purposely intended it to be so, but agreed that the unconscious plays a tremendous part in the creativity of writers and performers, and that many specific elements of the myth are significant factors of his monologues. He reacted most strongly, in this interview, to the suggestion of the symbolic importance of water and of mirrors in his monologues (including his novel, *Impossible Vacation*, which is written in first-person narrative form and tells, essentially, an autobiographical story) and indeed, in his personal life. Gray expressed the belief that water was a "hugely important" symbol in his life, and work, and that the recurrent idea of "reflection" as a metaphor for the reflecting pool of Narcissus has merit, and bears further examination.

The critic John Howell has intuitively suggested the correlation of Spalding Gray's work with Narcissus when he describes Gray as "an astonished, bewildered man-child trying to understand the real world" (10). Here, Howell has suggested the application of the two elements of the Narcissus myth: Gray's character as "man-child" (Narcissus is youthful and naively unaware of his real surroundings) and as self-analytical (in his "trying to understand the real world" he is like Narcissus obsessively trying to see and to know what he perceives as reality.) Another critic, David Hirson, points out in his article "Just Be Yourself" that "Gray's revelations tap into a collective worship of the mundane self: he titillates our narcissistic impulses by a titanic display of his own" (27). Here, perhaps, is the essence of Gray's protagonist's appeal: the acknowledgement that narcissistic impulses are universal
experiences. This is the argument posited by Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism*. The idea that individuals all wrestle with problems of the self (identity, image and sexuality, among others) resonates directly back to Freud's classic essay "On Narcissism," and strengthens the connection to the Narcissus myth.

Hirson also intuitively, like Howell, perceives a similarity to the issues explored in the Narcissus myth. Hirson also is apparently in agreement with Lasch's observation that the contemporary culture is in crisis in areas of identity and questions related to the self. He writes:

> Gray's stories show an America which is in the throes of a narcissistic identity crisis not unlike his own . . . . Wherever he looks, Gray discovers Americans in various stages of self-creation. He is not alone in his longing for identity. It is a condition to which the narcissist in everyone responds, and Gray, an extremely gifted storyteller, exploits that fact in his monologues (27).

Hirson has implicitly acknowledged what we all possibly suspect: Freud said narcissism is a normal phase of development, but we all worry that we're the only ones who got stuck there and never moved on to become wholly integrated, independent healthy selves. And it is this anxiety which Gray's character addresses so adeptly. Hirson cites, for example, the "search for the perfect moment" which is Gray's obsession in *Swimming to Cambodia*: "Gray's quest for a totally pure experience--what he calls the 'Perfect Moment'--is frustrated by a crippling self-awareness . . . and his entire life is observed as if it were happening to someone else" (27).

Like the mythical Narcissus, Spalding Gray's onstage persona is compelled to gaze at the image in the pool, which reflects back an equally attentive gaze. The
difference is that Narcissus is tragically unaware that the object of his desire is his own reflection, and Gray's character is sharply aware of his identity as object. However, there is a subtle similarity. Although Gray obviously knows, in writing about the self as text, that his intense exploration of problems of identity introduces the quality of "self" as "other," he states that he is not overtly conscious of the many other resonances in his work of elements of the Narcissus myth.

In the myth, Narcissus ignores the call of Echo, who loves him and offers her love unconditionally. Preferring the beautiful image he sees reflected in the water, he causes Echo to despair and suffer, all the while agonizing that the adored (and idealized) countenance he sees is unattainable. Not realizing that the reflected image is precisely that, a reflection, Narcissus is unaware that he has essentially "split off" an aspect of the self, and projected a separate identity onto the object of his affection, creating a double, a separate self. As the intensity of Narcissus's gaze increases, the agony intensifies as well, for Narcissus's love remains perpetually unrequited, despite the continuing love of Echo. Always a peripheral character, Echo wastes away until she is only a voice; Narcissus never "saw" her; instead, he effectively erased her. Still unable to obtain the desired response from the beautiful image in the pool, Narcissus also is gradually consumed by desire. He fades away as well, unable to sustain physical health due to his obsessive passion, unable to eat, unable to move away from the pool. Death does not bring about any sense of relief for Narcissus, for as he passes into the underworld after death, he again encounters the same, adored face in the water of the River Styx, perpetuating his agony in eternity.
For an examination of the works of Spalding Gray in terms of the Narcissus myth, there are abundant connections. Beyond the indictment of the culture that Christopher Lasch has introduced, there are real parallels to the Narcissus myth throughout Gray's monologues: the self as "other," the androgynous loved image, the place of water as source of love and/or wisdom, the concept of self-"reflection," the peripheral Echo, and, perhaps most meaningfully, the frightening attraction to or fear of death. All of these are issues which Gray has explored frankly in his writing and performing since his early autobiography-based experimental work with the Performance Group in the 1970s, and the collaborative experimental work with the Wooster Group into the 1980s. Because he has dealt so openly with personal troubling experiences, audiences possibly relate to him on a different level than other performers, even those who also explore autobiographical dilemmas, such as Eric Bogosian or Karen Finley. His candid discussions of therapy, family relationships, sexuality, the suicide of his mother, AIDS paranoia, depression and other problems related to identity and personal crisis all reveal an intense drive to examine, and reveal, the self, a parallel to the compulsion of Narcissus to "know" or to "possess" the object of his own desire: the reflected self.

3In On Edge, C. Carr contrasts the work of Spalding Gray with Karen Finley, whose work she describes as being violent in her approach to self-reflexive material. Carr describes Gray, "... whose work tells the ongoing story of his own life," as using "an 'I'm not acting' persona, removed at some level from a 'real' self. [Karen] Finley doesn't offer such wholeness; she presents a persona that has shattered, a self unable to put a face on things' (123). In Carr's analysis, Gray's work puts "a face on things" by virtue of telling a continuing narrative, rather than performing fragmentary scenarios from personal experiences, as Finley does.
In an August, 1995 interview for *The New York Times Magazine*, Gray was asked, "You always seem to be cast in films as the bow-tie type. Is this the real you, or would you like to play something different?" Though Gray's work in film differs markedly from the autobiography-based performances of his monologues, his response to this particular question illuminates his concept of self, or more precisely, his acute awareness of a lack of an integrated self:

Hollywood rarely casts against type. I've often paraphrased Bob Dylan's line, 'I may look like Robert Ford, but I feel just like Jesse James,' by saying, 'I may look like a doctor, the American Ambassador's aide or a gynecologist, but I feel like Woody Allen.' I don't want to sound like, but I don't have any sense of the 'real' me. With the coming of age, I look more and more like the WASP Republican I was originally programmed to be. That's the outside image that the camera captures. Inside, I'm an unconscious Luddite tripping over the ragged edges of my imperfect history, my heap of a life, still unable to tie a bow tie, satisfied with a clip-on. (14)

In this passage, Gray reveals a sense of duality in his concept of self: he says he has no sense of a "real" self, yet in contrast, he talks about himself in great detail before live audiences, and the content of his material is the self.

David Hirson alludes to this duality, and observes that to publicly relate experiences of the private self adds a subtext of autoeroticism:

Relevent self-consciousness and lack of identity constrain him to 'act himself' on stage . . . . Telling about life 'eroticizes' it. In front of listeners, the sham evolves into an authentic center of attention . . . . In our presence, at least, he appears to be somebody, maybe even one of the Real People . . . . (14)

The sham Hirson describes is the "act" of performing the self in the hope of convincing an audience (or himself) that the self is real, to counter the terror, perhaps, that in reality there is no self.
This is the very essence of narcissism as described by Lasch: the belief that truly to exist, one must see oneself reflected by others, and to an unhealthy extreme, which leads to a culture too self-involved to have any altruistic behaviors. But what Gray's unique storytelling quality brings to the work prevents a sense of depressing fatalism through his use of ironic, subtle humor. It is Gray's onstage character's wry sense of amusement, even amidst the anxiety-ridden battles to keep his spiritual side alive, which differentiate him from Narcissus. Unable to move away from the reflected image, Narcissus perishes oblivious to the love of Echo. Spalding Gray's ability to see humor in spite of pain may be his psychic salvation.

In my interview with Spalding Gray I asked him about his concept of humor. He responded that he believes "most humor comes out of a great sadness, if not great pain." Mel Gussow has described this ability of Gray's to use humor to develop a sense of "comic insight," which audiences connect to on very personal levels. Writes Gussow (in a review of the 1986, *Terrors of Pleasure,* ) "[t]hough the narrative is entirely centered around Mr. Gray himself, it never suffers from self-pity or self-indulgence. He remains the antihero in his own fascinating life story, the never ending tale of EverySpalding (C19).

The purpose of this study is not to attempt to psychoanalyze the writer and performer, Spalding Gray. It is, rather, an examination of how the myth of Narcissus illuminates the works of Spalding Gray. It is also an analysis of the narcissistic issues and dilemmas faced by the onstage character, Spalding Gray, whose struggles to
define the self connect very strongly to audiences wrestling with similar issues. The works are viewed within the context of cultural narcissism to illustrate their relevance to contemporary societal influences and circumstances.4

There have been numerous articles and reviews published concerning the monologues of Spalding Gray, his film career, and his novel, Impossible Vacation. Gray's work is also included in several books, most notably Theodore Shank's American Alternative Theatre, David Savran's Breaking the Rules (about the development of the Wooster Group) and Deborah Geis's Postmodern Theatrics: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama. These works all deal with Gray's monologue form in various ways, particularly as it grew out of autobiographical experience. Another book, Naomi Epel's Writers Dreaming, provides an insightful interview with Spalding Gray concerning his way of working, especially as it relates to dreams and the unconscious, which Gray has said is important to the development of symbolic images in his monologues.5 One dissertation has been published

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4Peggy Phelan, in Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (1993), examines the connection between psychoanalytic theory and literature, particularly performance text. She writes of the physical body itself as split, "both internal and external; invisible and visible; sick and well; living and dead" (172). Phelan points out that this is a recurring motif in contemporary performance, one which directly addresses societal concerns. For more on the topic of the mind/body connection as it relates to contemporary performance, see also Silvio Gaggi, Modern/Postmodern: A Study in Twentieth Century Ideas (particularly his view of art as a "necessary antidote to the repression of the spiritual in a materialistic culture" (1) and Christopher Innes, Avant Garde Theatre 1892-1992.

5For additional exploration of the connection between contemporary culture, mythology and performance, see Bruce Barber, who discusses "our contemporary narcissism" and the dangers posed for performers who can become "stranded on the mirrored pyramid of transcendental self-attention" (36). See also June Schlueter, who
concerning his work as of this writing: Adonia Dell Placette's *Spalding Gray: The Humorist and His 'Method,'* published by the University of Michigan Press in 1990.

To date, there are no published works which relate to Spalding Gray's use of elements of mythology. This is perhaps surprising, given that Gray's monologues deal with timeless, universal dilemmas concerning identity and destiny, ideas which all figure prominently in mythology and folklore. It is hoped that this study, which examines the narcissistic dilemmas faced by Gray's onstage persona in light of the myth of Narcissus will contextualize Gray's work as a major contribution to contemporary performance and cultural experience.6

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6 For additional exploration of the connection between contemporary culture, mythology and performance, see Bruce Barber, who discusses "our contemporary narcissism" and the dangers posed for performers who can become "stranded on the mirrored pyramid of transcendental self-attention" (36). See also June Schlueter, who describes mythographer Joseph Campbell and American playwright Sam Shepard as believers in the concept "that when a culture loses contact with the truth of its mythology, it degenerates" (215).
CHAPTER 2

BY THE WATER: SUBSTANCE IN WHAT WAS ONLY SHADOW

In Ovid's version of the Narcissus Myth, Rolfe Humphries' translation of the youthful Narcissus has discovered an image in the pool with whom he has instantly fallen in love. Describing the reflection as "that unbodied hope," Ovid tells the reader something Narcissus cannot realize. He is so thoroughly entranced, he does not see that the image has no corporeal form, no true substance. The image seen is the personified hope of Narcissus, the object of obsessive desire, and the water's surface is the source of that hope. Providing a clear reflective surface (at least when not disturbed), the water at once gives Narcissus freedom (by allowing him the vision of the adored image) and keeps him enslaved (by disallowing the satisfaction of possession of the image.)

Intuitively, Spalding Gray also alludes to varied references to water as a compelling source of (self-)reflection. In the April 25, 1995 interview, he stated that water is indeed a huge symbol in his life, and that he has used water (and related ideas such as beaches, drowning and reflecting surfaces) as metaphors for autobiographical events. However, most notably in Swimming to Cambodia and the novel Impossible Vacation, he refers to water images to draw attention away, rather
than toward, the self. This irony may be intentional, or it may be that it is operational on a subliminal, unconscious level which connects directly to Gray's character's locus within the shared American culture.

As a participant in the American culture (as resident and self-aware individual, and as performance artist) Gray is influenced by the national literary and historical heritage. But, as Christopher Lasch has argued in his 1979 *The Culture of Narcissism*, most people living within, in this case, the American culture of the late 20th century, are to some extent only partially aware of the sources for commonly understood metaphors and patterns of traditional behavior. As an introspective and philosophical artist and performer, Gray is perhaps more attuned to American references to mythological sources, but is also perhaps unaware that, like all of us, he reveals significant commentary on unconscious levels as well.

Indeed, autoperformance may lend itself to unconscious communication by virtue of its form. As a monologist who writes about the fragmentation and continual remodification of the chaotic postmodern world, Gray seems intensely aware of his own need to define and re-define the self, offering as well a biting critique of the culture. The irony of Gray's particular approach to the monologue form is that in some significant ways, his works are indeed autobiographical, yet they lead the listeners away from, rather than toward, the self of his onstage persona. Deborah Geis has noted that performance artists in general "urge their audiences to reconsider the traditional boundaries between performance and reality, art and life, fiction and autobiography" (152).
This is especially true in Gray's case as a performer influenced by techniques explored by the Open Theater. Performance artists like Gray who have previously worked with (or have been influenced by) the Open Theater and the Living Theatre "do not necessarily create characters that they subsequently enact; rather they deliberately confuse their real-life 'selves' with the persona(s)--in their works of performance" (152).7 In Gray's case this is especially true, and he has referred to the difficulty he experienced when writing his novel, Impossible Vacation. Saying that the novel is fictionalized only to the extent that a better narrative arrangement is presented, Gray stated to me that he will never write another novel, because he is not good at concealing or disguising, that in fact what he does is reveal.

Though Impossible Vacation is not a monologue, it is in a sense still "autoperformance" in that it is so strongly autobiographical. Therefore, the novel and his monologue Swimming to Cambodia have in common the shared quality of speaking about the self, yet at the same time, speaking around the self. Swimming to Cambodia, Gray's 1985 monologue was written ostensibly about his experiences as an actor in the Roland Joffe film The Killing Fields. However, on a deeper level, the monologue is a severe indictment of the American culture, particularly the publicly accepted image of the American value of democracy won by patriotic sacrifice. The Killing Fields is a film about the withdrawal of the American diplomatic forces from

7 Deborah Geis also explores the idea that postmodern writers "recurrently write themselves" or their "metafictional personas" as "authors" in their novels. She points out, in Postmodern Theatric(k)s, that in contemporary drama performance artists draw the closest parallel to this technique of "autofiction."
Cambodia prior to the invasion of the Khmer Rouge in 1975. While the monologue is concerned with Gray's experience during the filming of the movie, it is impossible to avoid the topic of the film itself: the American abandonment of a beautiful, peace-loving culture to certain annihilation. It becomes clear that Gray poses the argument that the postmodern American culture was effectively abandoned another beautiful society: its own.

Swimming to Cambodia was filmed in 1987. As directed by Jonathan Demme (with music by Laurie Anderson) the filmed version varies significantly from the 1985 published version of the monologue. As a film, the adaptation has allowed for full use of cinematic devices, which affect the perception of the viewer. Closeups of Spalding Gray heighten attention of the viewer and the intercutting of excerpts from the film The Killing Fields are examples of the contributions the medium of film make which provide commentary on the content of the monologue. Anderson's music also helps focus the viewers' perceptions of emotional content in a way not possible in print. However, one strong focus the two versions share is the search Spalding Gray's persona undertakes while present in the tropical Asian environment for what he calls "a Perfect Moment" (Swimming to Cambodia 5).

Like most of Gray’s monologues, Swimming to Cambodia follows a nonlinear presentational structure, with the effect being very personal, much like stream-of-consciousness writing. After orienting his audience to the specific series of events which comprise this particular monologue, Gray’s character moves quickly to a
description of the exotic locale for the filming of The Killing Fields, immediately beginning to establish water-related, metaphoric settings. In the following passages, underlined portions are my emphasis:

It was the first day off in a long time, and all of us were trying to get a little rest and relaxation out by the pool at this big, modern hotel that looked something like a prison. If I had to call it anything I would call it a ‘pleasure prison.’ It was the kind of place you might come to on a package tour out of Bangkok. You’d come down on a chartered bus—and you’d probably not wander off the grounds because of the high barbed-wire fence they have to keep you in and the bandits out. And every so often you would hear shotguns going off as the hotel guards fired at rabid dogs down along the beach on the Gulf of Siam.

But if you really wanted to walk on the beach, all you had to learn to do was to pick up a piece of seaweed, shake it in the dog’s face and everything would be hunky-dory.

So it was our first day off in a long time and there were about 130 of us out by the pool trying to get a little rest and relaxation, and the Thai waiters were running and jumping over hedges to bring us ‘Kloster! More Kloster!’ Everyone was ordering Kloster beer. No one was ordering the Singah because someone had said that Singah, which is exported to the United States, has formaldehyde in it. The waiters were running and jumping over hedges because they couldn’t get to us fast enough. They were running and jumping and smiling—not a silly smile but a profound smile, a deep smile. There was nothing idiotic about it because the Thais have a word, sanug, which, loosely translated, means ‘fun.’ And they never do anything that isn’t sanug—if it isn’t sanug they won’t touch it.

Some say that the Thais are the nicest people that money can buy, because they like to have fun. They know how to have fun and, perhaps due to their very permissive strain of Buddhism, they don’t have to suffer for it after they have it.

It was a lovely day and we were all out by the pool and the Sparks—the British electricians were called ‘the Sparks’—were out there with their Thai wives. They had had the good sense—or bad sense, depending on how you look at it—as soon as they arrived in Bangkok, to go down to Pat Pong and buy up women to travel with them. I was told that each man bought two women so as not to risk falling in love. And there the Sparks were, lying like 250-pound beached whales while their ninety-pound ‘Thai wives,’ in little two-piece bathing suits, walked up and down on them giving them Shiatsu messages as a Thai
waiter ran, jumped over the hedge, tripped and fell, hurling his Klosters down to explode on the cement by the pool. And looking up with a great smile he said, 'Sorry sir, we just run out of Kloster.' (3-4)

Gray's persona has clearly established the Bangkok hotel swimming pool as a reference point for his existence during the filming of the movie. References to "by the pool" are all used in the previous passage not only to describe the setting of recreational conversation, but to create an image of water as a source of rejuvenation. This use of water imagery parallels the pool's figurative significance in the myth: Narcissus finds an arresting, responsive visage attracting him from beneath the smooth surface of the clear water. In Gray's passage above, the swimming pool is described as a place of "a little rest and relaxation," a place where people can be refreshed by alcohol and sybaritic passing of an unhurried "lovely day." Gray emphasizes that the Thai people "know how to have fun and, perhaps due to their very permissive strain of Buddhism, they don't have to suffer for it after they have it" (4).

It is particularly significant that Gray's character describes the surroundings immediately beyond the hotel swimming pool as a foreboding, oppressive building "that looked something like a 'pleasure prison.'" He reinforces the entrapping sense of boundaries by describing the "high barbed-wire fence they have to keep you in and bandits out" and the sounds of "shotguns going off as the hotel guards fired at rabid dogs down along the beach on the Gulf of Siam." Here there is an extremely strong...

*The terminology of Gray's character, who describes the pool as a "pleasure prison" is reminiscent of the predicament of Narcissus at the pool.

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connection to the Narcissus myth: as beautiful and rejuvenating as the pool seems, the self is deceived. The self is drawn inescapably to the pool and remains trapped. Just as Narcissus becomes enslaved by the desire to possess the idealized figure at which he gazes in the pool, Gray becomes obsessed with the pursuit of one "Perfect Moment" (5). Like the Thai culture by which he is surrounded, Gray's onstage character will not do anything that is not "sanug" (4).

Although Gray's protagonist is involved, at the time this monologue takes place, in a longtime relationship with Renee Shafransky (who produced the filmed version of Swimming to Cambodia) he is soon influenced by the prevailing Thai cultural attitude concerning women as possessed objects of the self. He follows the example set by expatriate American (and British) men with whom he becomes acquainted, and acquires a Thai girlfriend, Joy. He describes their (primarily sexual) relationship in terms which are clearly reminiscent of Narcissus's idealized fantasy of a possessive sexual relationship with the nymph-like body:

Well, would you come down with me then so I can say goodbye to Joy? Joy was my Pat Pong girlfriend.

Going down to the Captain's Table where Joy worked seemed like a kind of strange homecoming. Her whole face lit up when she saw me and she really seemed happy. We did what we'd always done the three or four times I'd visited her before. We sat in a corner of the bar and I put my arm around her and we watched the other girls dance until closing time. There was nothing to say. She didn't speak English and I didn't speak Thai. She sat there almost naked in her two-piece bathing suit. I had no idea how old she was. Maybe nineteen.

She had a perfectly exquisite body. It was very small and childlike but at the same time ripe and fully developed like that of a
mature woman. She was a splendid, dark miniature and what I loved most was the texture of her skin. Joy was a joy to touch and knowing that I could, for a little extra money, go home with her at any time, I preferred that kind of suspended waiting and almost innocent touching. She did her best to keep smiling whenever I looked at her, but there were times when I was able to steal a secret glance and then I would see another side of Joy. I would catch her in a slightly drained and more reflective melancholy state, and I realized how much was always going on behind the scenes and how little I knew or wanted to know. Most of all I realized that I could never get to it without language.

It was then that I realized that I was just like all the others, a lonely displaced man in Thailand, and like all the others I couldn’t live long without the simple touch of women. At first I’d seen them all around me on the streets and I was satisfied to live only in my eyes. To gaze on their flesh was enough. But after a while I needed to touch and it was not unlike the way in which I needed to take my shoes off in order to dig my toes into Karon Beach.

You see, when you see that river of flesh coming at you in the streets, it’s very hard not to want to touch. It’s very hard not to see one flesh as all flesh. You get taken over like a curious child. At first Joy seemed happy to see me and we could ride on that novelty. The softness of her skin was like a kind of heaven on earth and I wanted to keep it that way and not think. But when I sat long enough with Joy I could see the joy drain out and a kind of melancholy despondency creep into her face. And when the stage lights went out and the house lights came up at quarter to one, I could see everyone scatter like cockroaches under fluorescent light. And I could see the bruises like rotten fruit on the girls’ legs.

When we got back to the hotel I realized something was wrong—-because two basic intentions in making love are pleasurable relief through sex, and some recognizable change in the other.' I could never really see the change in this particular other. And why should I expect change? After all, I was paying her. And I figured whatever she said or did was just an act. Also I think it had a lot to do with language. Eighty percent of erotic love for me is the language in and around the event. But she spoke very little English. All she could (or

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9 Though this particular phrasing is not related to the Narcissus water imagery, it is still an element of another aspect of the myth. Here, the reference recalls the nymph-like appearance (and asexual, or "childlike") quality of the image reflected in the pool.
would) say, over and over, was 'Joy like you.' I figured she said that to all the guys, but she was so convincing. I really wanted to believe her.

In the morning I'd try to feed her from a big bowl of fresh fruit that the hotel supplied. I'd say, 'Joy want banana?' And she'd always giggle, shake her head 'no' and disappear under the pillow. She could fit under the pillow.

This time I said, "No, no, no, Joy. It's time to go, Joy. I'm going back to New York City." And as I took her down to the cab, she looked like a little Minnie Mouse in high heels. And instead of getting into the cab she pushed me into it and ran back to the hotel. And the sliding electric glass doors opened and closed and she stood there waving goodbye as though she lived in the hotel and I was going home in the cab. All I could say was, 'No, no, Joy.' (102-105)

The two quoted passages above are extremely referential, on many levels, to the Narcissus myth. By describing the hotel as a "pleasure prison," Gray's persona immediately establishes the sense of being trapped. Like Narcissus, he is unable to free himself from the pool, in this case, a swimming pool for which everyone working on the film longs ("for a little rest and relaxation"). By describing the pool as a source of rejuvenation, Gray deepens the relationship to the Narcissus myth by recalling the image of the exhausted Narcissus seeking the refreshing water of the pool.

Ovid describes the pool as an oasis of calm surrounded by the wild forest:

There was a pool, limpid and silvery,  
Whither no shepherd came nor any herd,  
Nor mountain goat; and never bird nor beast  
Nor falling branch disturbed its shining peace;  
Grass grew around it, by the water fed,  
And trees to shield it from the warming sun.  
Here, --for the chase and heat had wearied him--  
The boy lay down, charmed by the quiet pool,  
And, while he slaked his thirst, another thirst  
Grew; as he drank he saw before his eyes
A form, a face, and loved with leaping heart
A hope unreal and thought the shape was real.
(Melville 63)

The scene as described by Ovid is one of replenishment and safety, surrounded by the wilderness of the forest. In Swimming to Cambodia, the restful pool is likewise surrounded by danger. Gray's character says that one would be unlikely "to wander off the grounds because of the high barbed-wire fence they have to keep you in and the bandits out," and adds that frequently the sound of gunshots would be heard "as the hotel guards fired at rabid dogs down along the beach on the gulf of Siam" (3-4).

The picture painted by Gray in the opening moments of the monologue is extraordinarily similar to the locale of the Narcissus myth: an exotic paradise surrounded by natural wildness, providing a compelling source of rejuvenation.

The imagery of water as a source of refreshment is heightened in Swimming to Cambodia by the Thai waiters hurrying to respond to the demands "to bring us 'Kloster! More Kloster!' Everyone was ordering Kloster beer" (3). The beer, a liquid, supplies the rejuvenation that the water supplies to Narcissus. More subtly, it also is a reference to the cultural climate of those involved in making the film, and almost subliminally suggests the Dionysian revelry and ritual associated with much of Greek mythology. In this way, Gray's protagonist establishes clear connections to the imagery of the Narcissus myth.

After relating the description of the Thai waiters hurrying to bring more beer, Gray's character defines the Thai concept of "sanug" which he says is loosely
translated as "fun" (4). The Thai waiters, running and jumping over hedges to respond to the demands of the hotel patrons, are described as running and jumping and smiling—not a silly smile but a profound smile, a deep smile. There was nothing idiotic about it because the Thais have a word, sanug . . . . And they never do anything that isn’t sanug—if it isn’t sanug they won’t touch it (4).

Beyond merely providing a colorful depiction of the Thai cultural behavior, Gray’s persona establishes another important resonance suggestive of mythic revelry and pursuit of pleasure. Gray’s character also describes the swimming pool as a "pleasure prison" and here, again, is a subtle similarity to the Narcissus myth. Although Narcissus finds rejuvenation at the pool, and sees the beautiful face of a creature who awakens an intense longing, he is trapped by the obsessive desire to possess the beloved creature. He is also in a "pleasure prison."

Narcissus is, of course, unaware that the image he desires is his own reflection: the single persona of Narcissus has divided. Essentially, Narcissus has unknowingly assigned an identity to the image he sees, and he has been cast as both lover and beloved. The split-off aspect of the self becomes a separate identity to Narcissus. Ovid, in Rolfe Humphries’ translation, says that:

... inside him, deep within him
Another thirst was growing, for he saw
An image in the pool, and fell in love
With that unbodied hope, and found a substance
In what was only shadow. He looks in wonder
Charmed by himself, spell-bound, and no more moving
Than any marble statue . . . . (3.410-437)

Narcissus has unwittingly created a double: he has projected a persona onto the reflected image, enabling him (he hopes) to possess the idealized figure.
Gray's character suggests a type of doubling in this opening passage of the monologue to accomplish a contrasting purpose: to suggest a splitting-off to prevent, rather than to enable, an idealized love. He recalls that it was "a lovely day and we were all out by the pool" (again establishing a serene, idyllic and protected setting) and the British electricians working on the film were also there with their Thai wives. Gray says, "They had the good sense—or bad sense, depending on how you look at it—as soon as they arrived in Bangkok, to go down to Pat Pong and buy up women to travel with them. I was told that each man bought two women so as not to risk falling in love." (4)

In this case, the splitting-off to create a doubling effect is to negate persona, rather than establish an identity. Whereas Narcissus unconsciously synthesizes a beloved object of desire, the characters here split one woman (an idealized object) into two competing images, both preventing the other from obtaining the full attention of the lover. Here, duplication does not provide opportunity for possession of the desired object. Instead, it effectively prevents any type of clear reflection. The men are in no danger of being trapped by love: if they are tempted to relate to one object of sexual desire as a real person, their attention will be re-directed by the equally attractive clone.

When the Thai waiter trips as he hurries to bring more Kloster beers, "hurling [them] down to explode on the cement by the pool," the untroubled paradise is disrupted. The pool has been disturbed. The imagery is strongly reminiscent of Ovid's telling of the myth:
How often in vain he kissed the cheating pool  
And in the water sank his hands to clasp  
The neck he saw, but could not clasp himself!  
Not knowing what he sees, he adores the sight;  
That false face fools and fuels his delight.  
You simple boy, why strive in vain to catch  
A fleeting image? (3. 428-434)

Each time Narcissus attempts to touch the creature he sees below the water's surface, the calm pool ripples and the image disappears. In *Swimming to Cambodia*, Gray's protagonist's description of the British electricians is similar: if a lover attempts to reach out to an adored image, another image intervenes, preventing contact. The figurative reflecting surface is disturbed and the object of desire is no longer clearly visible.

In the description Gray's character provides of his relationship to Joy in *Swimming to Cambodia*, the mythic element of a reflected image appears as he tells of his Pat Pong girlfriend's facial expression. He notes that "she did her best to keep smiling whenever I looked at her, but there were times when I was able to steal a secret glance and then I would see another side to Joy" (*Swimming to Cambodia* 103-4). Just as Narcissus sees only the full-face reflection (never the imperfect profile nor at an unflattering angle) Gray's persona notes that Joy appears to be happy (and thus an ideal) when she is aware of his gaze. When she is not aware of him looking at her, he sees "another side of Joy . . . . I realized how much was always going on behind the scenes and how little I knew or wanted to know" (104). Like Narcissus, Gray's onstage persona does not want to see an image which is not an ideal, for it
complicates the obsessive desire, resulting in a rippled, disturbed pool. For Gray's character, an undisturbed gaze is preferable. When he sees Joy's "slightly drained and melancholy state," he admits he does not want truly to "know" her. He prefers to keep her at a distance, so that her idealized facial expression of happiness never changes.

When he sees, all around him, other Thai women everywhere, he says at first he was "satisfied to live only in my eyes. To gaze on their flesh was enough" (104). Ultimately however, he is unable to resist the urge to reach out and capture the objects of desire. He says, "after awhile I needed to touch and it was not unlike the way in which I needed to take my shoes off in order to dig my toes into Karon Beach" (104). He is here again like Narcissus sinking his arms into the pool to possess the ideal.

In another section of Swimming to Cambodia, Gray's protagonist returns to the description of the Thai prostitutes and their relationships with the male tourists and business travellers. Gray explains that for some men who prefer not "to spend the whole night with a giggly, happy Thai whore driving you nuts, or if you’re afraid of the intimacies involved and would rather be in control, you can instead go to a message parlor" (41). The image of the setting clearly recalls the Narcissus myth by the use of glass and light and television screens as metaphors for the reflective surface of the pool:

You go in and there are, maybe, thirty-five women on one floor, behind a one-way glass, all fully clothed under fluorescent lighting, sitting on tiers and wearing numbers. All of them are looking at a focal point just under the partition. You don’t know what they’re
looking at, but it's a TV. They're all watching TV. So you strut up and down in front of that glass like a little Sultan until at last you think you've found the perrrr-fect body . . . . (41)

Here, Gray's persona clearly alludes to the perception of Narcissus, who believes he sees a beautiful water nymph living in a closed environment (the submerged world of the pool) underneath the water's surface. The Thai girls are in a similarly closed environment: they wait in one large holding tank until someone selects them as an object of sexual desire. The one-way glass and the fluorescent lighting further suggest that the girls are in a water-setting, much like an aquarium, which allows observers clear and unobstructed views of the creatures inside, while preventing the observed from having as clear a view of the observers due to the distortion of the glass and water.

It is a frustration and a disappointment to the observers that the girls do not return their gaze. The girls are focussed intently on another reflective surface: the television. When called by number, the responding girl reveals "by her disgruntled expression that it's not going to be as great as you had thought, because you've interrupted her TV show" (41-2). Here, the relationship to the Narcissus myth is not quite parallel. In the myth, the adoring gaze of the supposed water nymph is unwaveringly direct, leading Narcissus to believe that the creature returns his ardor with equal devotion. In Swimming to Cambodia, the vision of the girls is a more realistic reflection; the true emotional context of the idealized images is apparent to the observers, who recognize on some level that their sexual desire is not reciprocated. The real images (distracted and then disgruntled) are sharply contrasted
with Narcissus's perceived response of returned passion. However, like the specific
girl Joy (Gray's character's Pat Pong girlfriend) the other Thai prostitutes, once they
make the transition to an "on-duty" status, reflect happiness and devotion in their
facial expressions and physical actions. For increasingly higher payment, the girls
will perform a range of erotic services, ranging from a massage (with the male
"lover" in the nude, while the girl is fully clothed) to manual, oral and genital sex
(with the girl also in the nude, creating the perception that she is a "true" participant.)

To maintain the image of the situation as an idealized, romanticized encounter,
the knowledge that the relationship is based on a transaction of money can be
repressed by the male participant. From all appearances, it seems as though the
participants are engaged in mutually satisfying sexual activity, but the appearance is
deceiving. The resonance of the Narcissus myth emerges here, with the suppressed
realization that where the lover hopes to see substance, there is only shadow.

There are numerous other passages in the published version of Swimming to
Cambodia which recall Narcissus myth imagery, though the instances discussed above
are the most extensive, and parallel the most aspects of the Narcissus story. It must
also be noted that the published book version of Swimming to Cambodia and the
filmed version of the monologue vary somewhat in content. The published book
includes the detailed description of Gray's persona's relationship to Joy, the "Pat
Pong girlfriend," and the anecdotes related to the Thai prostitutes discussed above,
but Gray's performed character makes virtually no reference to either in the filmed
version. However, this is not to say that the filmed monologue does not connect to
the myth of Narcissus. In fact, the connection is still very strong, especially in the use of water as a metaphor for a place of entrapment, as a source of rejuvenation, and as a reflecting surface which provides a vision of idealized romantic and/or sexual obsession. However, the allusions to the myth are more subtle, and do not provide the same degree of "completeness" in paralleling each element of the Narcissus myth.

In the filmed version of Swimming to Cambodia, it is immediately apparent that water-related scenes and images are important. The monologue begins "by the water," establishing the context of the monologue as set against the filming of The Killing Fields: beaches are described vividly, including the images of seaweed (which can be shaken at the rabid dogs on the beach to frighten them away) beach sunsets, and beach parties on the Gulf of Siam, in ways which suggest water (and the Kloster beer) as sources of refreshment, ritual (shaking seaweed to fend off wild beasts) and pagan worship (buying women in Bangkok as a type of Dionysian ritual, and the naming of Gray's friend Ivan as "Devil in my Ear," suggesting pagan revelry).

Gray includes, in both the written text and in the film, anecdotes related to marijuana-induced "visions," particularly in reference to his epic search for a "perfect moment." Renee, his longtime girlfriend, has come to Thailand to visit Gray for two weeks during the filming of The Killing Fields, and she becomes anxious about resuming their life together after the filming is completed. Gray's character has promised to return to Krumville, New York with her, where they have rented a house for the summer, and the filming schedule is being extended. Like Echo, the character of Renee continually offers devotion and love. And, like Echo, her offers are not so
much rejected as simply not heard. Gray’s protagonist becomes obsessed with the
seeking of a "perfect moment" before he leaves the tropical paradise, revealing an
obsessive pursuit of the ideal, much like that of Narcissus's compulsive efforts to
possess the image in the water. Renee's character has given Gray's character an
ultimatum (which Echo never does; instead, she wastes away "shamed and rejected in
the woods.") (Melville 63). She demands that Gray's persona either marry her, or
give her a date when he will return home.

Both the film and the written text include Gray's protagonist's admission that
walking on the beach at sunset with Renee could have been his perfect moment, but
he did not recognize it. Gray's character, the idealist, interrupts the argument they
have about his uncertainty of a date to return to New York. As they walk on the
beach, he attempts to eliminate conflict by denying its existence. He says, "Stop,
Renee. Stop with the fighting. Look at this beautiful sunset. Look! Look! I might
be able to have a Perfect Moment right now and we could go home" (Swimming to
Cambodia 6). Renee, the realist, cannot accept the too-easy solution. Gray's persona
says, "Renee would have none of it. She's very confrontational and always wants to
talk about what is going on in the relationship, not the sunset" (6).

Again, a water-related setting is a place of seeking: the beach is where the
character of Renee gives him the ultimatum to marry her or specify a date when he
will go back. Gray's protagonist has just spoken with his friend Ivan (Devil in My
Ear) who advises him to keep the upper hand ("... after all, how many straight,
single men your age are there left in New York City anyway? What's she going to do? (6). He sees his opportunity to keep Renee yet deny commitment: he gives her a date of return.

The marijuana-induced vision occurs immediately after, as he and Renee continue with Ivan, down the beach. The imagery of water as a place where seeking takes place, is heightened:

By then it was dark and gentle waves were lapping as party sounds drifted in the distance. We were the only ones down on the beach, under the stars, and it was almost too much, too beautiful to bear. Ivan lit the Thai stick and passed it down. (7)

The smoke of the marijuana is a metaphor for a reflection, for it provides a vision distinctly revealing of Gray's persona's identity. He sees a hallucination of steaming human waste on a "stainless steel counter," a clear reference to a reflecting pool. He writes, "I somehow knew that it represented all of the negative energy in my mind" (7). In contrast, Gray's character sees a bubbly pastel energy floating about two inches off the stainless steel counter . . . connected . . . [to the human waste] through these tendrils . . . . . . It was then I realized that if I pulled the negative energy off the counter I would pull the positive off with it, and I'd be left with nothing but a stainless steel counter, which I was not ready for in my life. (7)

Upon this realization, the hallucination becomes a tunnel in which Gray's persona is going down very fast, but he believes that it must indicate he is becoming healthier, since the tunnel is not black, but gold leaf, with palm fronds and leaves spreading out "like the iris of a big eye" to the center of the Earth (8). The tropical paradise is likened to a metaphoric eye, a symbol of an overwhelmingly intense gaze. Gray's
onstage character cannot bear the scrutiny, even though it seems to come from within: the idea of any kind of commitment induces such an intense symbolic search for the self that he figuratively disappears. He momentarily loses "consciousness."

Gray writes that when his protagonist opens his eyes, Renee’s character was gone, having wondered off down the beach. The intensity of his hallucination returns, and Gray’s persona sees "what looked like a group of Thai girl scouts dancing around a campfire," strongly suggestive of Dionysian revelry. Suddenly, on his hands and knees, he begins to vomit, and the description of the scene reveals that he is, essentially, Narcissus at the pool, seeing his identity and his own eventual death even as he turns away from Echo:

Up it came, and each time the vomit hit the ground I covered it over with sand, and the sand I covered it with turned into a black gauze death mask that flew up and covered my face. And so it went; vomit-cover-mask, vomit-cover-mask, until I looked down to see that I had built an entire corpse in the sand and it was my corpse. It was my own decomposing corpse staring back at me, and I could see the teeth pushing through the rotting lips and the ribs coming through the decomposing flesh of my side. I looked up to see Renee standing over me saying, 'What's wrong, Hon?' I'm dying, that's what's wrong.' 'Oh. I thought you were having a good time building sand castles.' She had been looking on at a distance. (140)

Here, the character of Renee is clearly Echo just as Gray’s character is Narcissus. Having wandered down the beach, she has watched him continuously, and does not approach him to help, only because she is unaware of his suffering. Echo "grieves for the hopeless boy," watching as Narcissus agonizes that the beloved image is indeed his own (Melville 65). Renee’s persona is unaware that Gray’s character has experienced a type of epiphany: he has gazed upon his own death, face-to-face.
When combined with the sand, the "black gauze death mask" which takes the form of his "decomposing corpse staring back at me" is comparable to the realization of Narcissus that he and the image are one, and both will die (8-9). Melville translates of the moment of crisis for Narcissus:

Oh, I am he! Oh, now I know for sure
The image is my own; it’s for myself
I burn with love; I fan the flames I feel . . . .
Now sorrow saps my strength; of my life’s span
Not long is left; I die before my prime.
Nor is death sad for death will end my sorrow;
Would he I love might live a long tomorrow!
But know we two--one sour--one death will die. (65)

By a figurative pool, Gray's character has gazed upon an image which compels him. He realizes, clearly and unexpectedly that it is the self he sees at this moment, not the continual offering of love by Renee's persona as Echo. He associates marriage and/or long-term commitment to Renee with death rather than an affirmation of life.

Other figurative reflecting pools appear throughout Swimming to Cambodia and one of the most pervasive is the symbolic reference to the medium of film. The context of the entire monologue is within the framework of film as a reflective surface: all aspects of Swimming to Cambodia are directly associated with the filming of The Killing Fields, which Spalding Gray has described as Ronald Joffe's mission. In the written text of the monologue, Gray writes about his belief that, because of Joffe's intense and purposeful sense of the importance of the story of Dith

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The film The Killing Fields was described by Joffe as the story of New York Times reporter Sidney Schanberg and his assistant, Dith Pran, a Cambodian photographer who together covered the secret bombing of Cambodia by the United States, and the evacuation in Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge occupied the city.
Pran and Sidney Schanberg during the fall of Cambodia, he must be part of the project. He reveals a sense of identification with The Killing Fields on one level, but on a deeper level, a figurative identification with the medium of film as a reflective surface. He feels compulsively drawn to this symbolic pool, much the same way that Narcissus is drawn to the literal pool of water. Gray writes:

I really want to be in that film. In fact, I want to be in that film more than any project I've ever been approached for... I couldn't stand leaving it all to chance, and the first idea that occurred to me was prayer... But my illogical, preconscious voice would have none of this, and set up a condition I would have to call Compulsive Magical Thinking, which soon got quite out of control. (11)

Gray's persona begins a series of ritualistic behaviors (recalling the origin of mythic references within the context of trying to please the gods in order to win favor or be assured good health) in order to improve his chances of being cast. The film compels him, entrapping him in rituals of knocking, then knocking in sequences, selecting "every third can" of soup, snapping fingers. To a professional actor, it is, of course, a desirable move to be cast in a major motion picture. In the American culture, film actors are revered. But to Gray, even before he is cast, the compelling reflective surface of film has become another pleasure prison.

A somewhat isolated incident in the written text of Swimming to Cambodia reveals another use of film as a metaphor for a reflecting pool like that of the Narcissus myth. During the filming of the explosive action of the film's conclusion (reenacting the evacuation of Cambodia by the Americans) actual U.S. Marine guards play Marine guards. U.S. Marine equipment and personnel, both designed for scenes
exactly like those in *The Killing Fields*, are used as reflections of reality. One
Marine guard, who had escorted Gray's protagonist and the other actors in the scene
on and off the real Sikorski helicopter, asked for a favor:

> Would you please sign this picture for me?
> I want to send it to my folks in North Carolina.
> Because if I never do anything else in my life,
> at least I can say I have done this. (48)

Ironically, the soldier, trained to be a soldier, finds more significance in being in a
film where he plays a soldier. The photographic image is preferable to the real.
Like Narcissus, he turns away from reality to gaze upon the reflected self. Unlike
Narcissus, he is aware the image is his own, and this is one instance where Gray
subtly comments on the American culture. By focussing on the individual example,
albeit in a humorous way, we identify with the soldier as audience. As Americans,
we are part of the society which pioneered the movie-making industry, all citizens of
Hollywood. But on some level we cannot fail to perceive Gray's message: we are
not our image.

The American culture prides itself on its concept of democracy, especially the
historical context of having been won at great cost. The pioneering spirit, and the
image of brave citizens who would gladly fight to protect liberty are highly valued
concepts of identification. The patriotic spirit, also reflected in the ideal of fighting
to preserve democracy wherever it is threatened, is a crucial aspect of American
cultural identity. However, Gray clearly indict the culture, for it does not live up to
its ideal. Rather than maintaining a presence in Cambodia, fighting to the death to
preserve liberty in the face of certain doom as the Khmer Rouge inevitably prepare to occupy Phnom Penh, the Americans flee. The United States essentially abandons those it had promised to protect.

Gray eloquently quotes Prince Sirik Matak and relates the story of the events which follow:

Dear Excellency and Friend,
I thank you very sincerely for your letter and for your offer to transport me toward freedom. I cannot, alas, leave in such a cowardly fashion. As for you, and in particular for your great country, I never believed for a moment that you would have the sentiment of abandoning a people which has chosen liberty. You have refused us your protection and we can do nothing about it. You leave, and it is my wish that you and your country will find happiness under the sky. But mark it well, that if I shall die here on the spot, and in the country that I love, it is too bad because we are all born and must one day die. I have only committed this mistake of believing in you, the Americans. Please accept, Excellency, my dear friend, my faithful and friendly sentiments. Sirik Matak Five days later their livers were carried through the streets on sticks. (49)

Gray relates the horrors which resulted as the Khmer Rouge invaded Phnom Penh in a way which resonates with images from the Narcissus myth. He points out that as the Khmer Rouge descended from the mountains, the Cambodians "threw down their guns and raced to embrace them, thinking that the country would then be reunited. The Khmer Rouge did not smile back" (50). The Cambodian people, split into two selves at that time: traditional Cambodians and the split-off Khmer Rouge rebel faction. Like Narcissus gazing into the pool, hoping to see an adoring gaze returned, the troops hoped to see their countrymen returning the welcoming gaze of love.

In Swimming to Cambodia, Gray graphically describes what happened instead, providing anecdotes of the types of atrocities which continued for four years, in the
absence of U.S. intervention. He points out the irony in the use of American bomb
craters which became "a perfect grave. It was a king of hell on earth" (51). Because
the siege was a kind of civil war, countrymen against countrymen, Gray's persona
describes it as "mad genocide," pointing out that "to this day no one knows exactly
what happened" (51). This situation is like the death of Narcissus and his descent
into Hades: having realized it is the reflection of his own image he sees in the Pool,
Narcissus reacts with horror and despair, briefly glimpsing the horrified expression of
his reflection. He laments that the image cannot return real love at all, and descends
to the underworld after he turns his back on living and wastes away. For the
Cambodian culture, the four year siege of horror is likewise a descent into a
figurative Hades, after a momentary recognition that the returned gaze of the Khmer
Rouge is menacing, rather than inviting. Gray subtly, but clearly, underscores the
story of the fall of Cambodia with the realization that the American government, by
withdrawing after first providing military aid, precipitated the fall. The myth of
American support of democracy proves false, and Prince Sirik Matak's letter indicates
the same acknowledgement of reality that Narcissus experienced: the reflection was
not real. Gray's protagonist says in the filmed version, "Who needs a metaphor for
hell--this actually happened."

It is apparent that the experience of appearing in *The Killing Fields* had a
profound effect upon Gray, who before this time did not consider himself very
political. In both the filmed and printed versions of the monologue, Gray describes
telling Roland Joffe that he "had not even voted before" in his life, and points out the
 ironic humor in Joffe's pronouncement that this made Gray a "perfect" candidate to play the American ambassador's aide (10). But beyond the deep compassion Gray experiences for the Cambodian people, he is deeply disturbed by the failure of the American government to provide the support for democracy that the American myth promises. Using California as the essence of the American myth (the healthy sunshine, the freedom of the lifestyle, the Hollywood movie industry) Gray critiques himself and all other Americans when his vision of American happiness and liberty fades:

> And wasn't life about service? Didn't I have enough pleasure in my life and wasn't it now time to help ease the pain of others? And the Bodhisatva's vow came to me: If all people can't reside in a state of pleasure in Southern California, then no one can until all can. And I could see the State of California collapsing, not from earthquakes, but from the weight of the world as all the wretched of the earth clamored toward the sun that broke through bare lemon trees and devoured fruit bushes. How could I think of my pleasure when the world still suffered so? How? How? How? Oh, the shame of it! (124)

At this point, Gray's character is grieving, for he realizes this is a farewell to a perception of the United States that he will not have again.

Earlier, Gray's protagonist had said farewell to the luxury he experienced as a member of the cast of The Killing Fields when filming was completed and he and Renee prepared to leave Thailand:

> A private car was waiting for us and Renee and I were driven back to the Pleasure Prison. As we rode along I was thinking, "Why do I feel so inflated, so pumped up, so on edge? I have been here eight weeks and worked only eight days." I mean, talk about mad dogs and Englishmen, the British were incredible. A sixty-year-ole makeup man stood for hours each day in the burning sun, just to press ice packs
on our necks so we wouldn’t faint, and I was complaining? I was feeling ravaged, all spoiled and puffed up. But, oh, how I was going to miss it. How I was going to miss it.

Riding in the car, I said a silent farewell. Farewell to the fantastic breakfasts, the pineapple like I’d never tasted and probably never will taste again. Farewell to the fresh mango and papaya, farewell to the Thai maid and the fresh, clean, cotton sheets on the king-size bed every night. Farewell to the incredible free lunches under the circus tent with fresh meat flown in from America every day. Roast lamb, roast potatoes and green beans at 110 degrees, in accordance with British Equity. Farewell to the cakes and teas and ice at four. Farewell to the Thai driver with the tinted glasses and the Mercedes with the one-way windows. Farewell to the single fresh rose in the glass on my bureau every morning.

And just as I was dozing off in the Pleasure Prison, I had a flash. An inkling. I suddenly thought I knew what it was that killed Marilyn Monroe. (59)

Like Narcissus at the pool, Gray’s persona realizes we are not our image. The myth of American democracy, love of liberty, fighting-to-the-death to preserve freedom, and sacrificing our very lives to emancipate oppressed peoples is a false image, a reflection we have merely cast upon a pool ourselves. Just as Gray’s character’s lifestyle in Thailand, taking on a persona of a film actor, is not his true identity (though it is reflected in the medium of film), U.S. Government actions reveal an identity separate from the American myth. The culture looks upon its reflection, and realizes in sorrow that, like Narcissus, the idealized, beautiful image we have gazed upon adoringly is only shadow.
CHAPTER 3

MIRRORS OF THE SELF:
THE LOVED BECOMES THE LOVER, THE SEEKER SOUGHT

In the Narcissus myth, as told by Ovid, the beautiful youth is loved and sought by both girls and boys. Ovid includes a description of the appeal of beautiful Narcissus as being equally attractive to members of both sexes, suggesting an androgynous quality to the physical appearance of the youth:

Narcissus now had reached his sixteenth year
And seemed both man and boy; and man and youth
And girl desired him, but hard pride
Ruled in that delicate frame, and never a youth
And never a girl could touch his haughty heart. (Melville 61)

This passage also suggests a duality in the nature of the youthful Narcissus on several levels: he is both man and boy (childlike yet of sexual maturity) and possesses qualities which attract both male and female admirers.

There are corresponding resonances in the works of Spalding Gray, also on several levels. First, by the very nature of his performance material, his monologues are at once private (because they are self-referential, autobiography-based) and public (because they are publicly performed and reviewed). Second, on a deeper level, there is a parallel to the duality of Narcissus’s sexual nature with Gray’s onstage character’s
references to experimentation with homosexuality, and his Buddhist-influenced
thinking in terms of having both a male and a female side to his own psyche. In an
interview, Gray stated, concerning the relationship with his mother (which he believes
to be the original influence in the development of a feminine side of his personality):

I was the center son and I was the one that she was hoping would be a
girl. She was certainly looking for a girl and always talked about me
as being like a girl and having lovely, curly hair and lovely legs and
feminizing me. And I am six degrees away from being gay, you know,
it was a very tenuous, close thing. Certainly, I am bisexual.
Certainly, I am very aware of my bisexuality, but in that classic kind of
way, my mother was not only feminizing me but also taking me on as a
psychic lover. (22)

Here, Gray reveals an additional sense of duality in his psychic makeup. In his
monologues, as well as in this particular interview, Gray openly discusses the
complexity of the relationship to his mother, and here specifically refers to the duality
of being both her son and, in a figurative sense, her lover.

In Buddhist thought, the physical body has both male and female aspects, the
right side being associated with male sexual identity, and the left side with female.11

Gray, who says he is "still strongly influenced" by Buddhism and other Eastern
religious teaching, explored the idea of a breakdown in physical health as having
specific referential connections to the mind's health as well in the monologue, Gray's
Anatomy:

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11 For Winnicott's discussion of an individual's bisexual nature and the duality
associated with male and female aspects of personality, see his Playing and Reality.
In chapter 5, "Creativity and Its Origins," Winnicott approaches bisexuality in terms
of "splitting off" male and female aspects of personality and investigates what he calls
"pure male" and "pure female" elements in the context of object relations.
I was very concerned that my entire left side was going into rebellion, something's out of whack, and the left side is the female, and it's going right up: calcium heel spur, torn meniscus, tore my knee cartilage in December, left side hernia, now left side tingling in my arm because a nerve is pinching my seventh vertebrae, so the whole left side is just tingling all the time, left cataract. . . . Just the whole left side is completely freaked. Part of me would read Alice Miller and say, 'Right on.' And the other part would go, 'Doesn't make any sense at all, just happens to be this way.' Back to all things are contingent. (36)

The monologue Gray's Anatomy explores this mind-body connection particularly in reference to his fear of aging and of death, which in turn recalls another element of the Narcissus myth: the emphasis placed on the value of the youthfulness and corresponding beauty of Narcissus. When Narcissus looked into the pool,

. . . he saw an image in the pool, and fell in love . . . .
Charmed by himself, spell-bound, and no more moving
Than any marble statue. Lying prone
He sees his eyes, twin stars, and locks as comely
As those of Bacchus or the god Apollo.
Smooth cheeks, and ivory neck, and the bright beauty
Of countenance, and a flush of color rising
In the fair whiteness. Everything attracts him
That makes him so attractive . . . . (Humphries)

Essentially, the pool functions as a mirror, for in reflecting back to Narcissus "everything [which] attracts him," the surface reveals the same characteristics which make the youth so physically attractive. Here, much more than Narcissus realizes at this point, like literally attracts like. The reflective surface of the pool provides a mirror, revealing an idealized, always adoring "other," in this case, the self.
All of Gray's monologues "mirror" Gray's identity, of course, by their very nature: they are based on his own life experiences. It must be remembered, however, that the character is an onstage persona created with the intention of being publicly performed. In addition, the performer is also the author, so that at every point of artistic decision-making, the onstage persona can be shaped according to the aesthetic choices made by Spalding Gray. In this way, the character named "Spalding Gray," becomes an idealized image. Like the reflection of Narcissus, the image returns an approving and continuous "gaze." The response of the reflected images in both the Narcissus myth and in Gray's monologues is affirming and positive.

Gray uses the metaphor of mirrors particularly clearly in his 1991 monologue, *Monster in a Box* (published in hardcopy in 1992 by Vintage Books.) The figurative use of a mirror is operative on several levels at once. In addition to the mirror, which all of Gray's self-reflexive monologues provide, the work refers back and forth to other works by Gray (including his autobiographical novel, *Impossible Vacation*) and utilizes mirrors within the context of the story itself to suggest figurative "mirroring," such as doubling and psychoanalysis. Gray's development of an onstage persona who shares the same name, his use of the first person form in his storytelling technique, and his subtle extraction of real life events to shape the narrative all contribute to a distinct sense of the self as an other in his monologues. By examining his own life, contextualizing it for his audience, and providing

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12Alice Miller explores the doubling effect of the relationship between a therapist and analysand in psychoanalysis. For her description of the analyst/analysand dynamic, see *The Drama of the Gifted Child.*
commentary (about why certain personal actions had specific consequences, for example) the onstage character "Spalding Gray" becomes a double for the man, Spalding Gray.

The literary figure of the double has been defined in several ways, and is sometimes described (by Carl Keppler, for example) as a "second self," in contrast to the psychic makeup of the first self. Keppler views the double as an actual, distinct separate individual rather than "alternating states" of the same character. Keppler's view of the double is as an "objective second self, [possessing] external reality, clearly independent of the first self, but [lacking] any sort of inward linkage or continuity with the latter; it is 'second,' but not 'self'" (9-10). Similarly, Otto Rank has written in The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study that, whereas the double is indeed a separate entity, the tension between the two characters is so compelling that only one of the two can actually survive. Rank says "... considered externally, the double is the rival of his prototype in anything and everything, but primarily in the love of a woman" (75). Keppler and Rank agree that a literary double has a distinct, separate existence, with Rank writing extensively of the extreme nature of the relationship, resulting in the death of one or the other individual.13

These definitions of the double contrast sharply with the nature of Spalding Gray's employment of an other as essentially an idealized, split-off self. The motif of the search for a fuller understanding of his personal history ("... to heal myself

13See also Robert Rogers, The Double in Literature: A Psychoanalytic Study (1992). This work deals extensively with the double in terms of the death significance about which Rank also writes.
through the telling... to make sense of it") which is so consistent throughout all of Gray's monologues is evidence of Gray's use of a mirror image (his figurative reflection in the pool) as a projection of an idealized self. For Gray, his protagonist in *Monster in a Box* mirrors the self: by performing a work based on his experiences writing the novel, he reflects insight about the self which recall the mirroring relationship of therapist and analysand.

That Gray's monologues frequently incorporate anecdotes about his personal interest in psychoanalysis and other forms of therapy strengthens the symbolic use of references to mirrors. In classical psychoanalysis, frequently referred to as "the talking cure" because of its emphasis on a patient's retelling of personal experiences, a therapist provides a figurative "mirror," which "reflects" commentary back to the patient. Gray's monologue *Monster in a Box* includes several extended references to sessions with his psychoanalyst in Los Angeles, which are specifically concerned with how his persona's therapist acted as a mirror for him in precise circumstances.

*Monster in a Box* is, essentially, one big mirror: it concerns the difficulty Gray's protagonist experienced as he wrote his autobiographical novel, *Impossible Vacation*. He narrates the novel, like the monologues, in the first person, and names the narrator Brewster North. Gray says:

> I changed the names to protect the guilty. I changed the central character from my name, Spalding Gray, to Brewster North... who can't commit to his girlfriend Cleo--although they've been together ten years--until he takes a vacation alone and just goes off and pleasurableizes himself without complications. He just goes and learns how to hang out like a guy hanging out alone. And he wants to do this in Bali... with the money that his mother left to him after she committed suicide... The monologue I'm going to perform tonight is about something
else. The monologue is about all the interruptions that happened to me while I was trying to write the book. In fact, I'd have to say the monologue you're going to hear tonight is a monologue about a man who can't write a book about a man who can't take a vacation. (5)

Unlike Narcissus, Gray's character is aware that the image he sees reflected is his own. (He has, of course, placed the self there for everyone, himself included, to gaze upon.) However, Gray's persona mentions numerous symbolic references to figurative mirrors throughout the monologue, which provides complex and rich texture to the material. In addition, the mirrors all function in ways which are parallel to their use in the myth of Narcissus: like the pool, they reflect the self as an other.

Gray the performer begins Monster in a Box with a brief explanation of what people will see and hear, providing a contextualizing sense of personal, intimate contact with the audience. He explains that the very process of writing a novel, even a self-reflective one, presented unique difficulties due to his inability to "make things up," but he proceeds anyway as a means of expanding his work into new areas. In the filmed version of the monologue, Gray's character explains that the idea of working on a novel was a way of approaching a new aspect of his own psyche. He says he felt that doing the monologues was "making [him] too extroverted . . . ." Therefore, the sense here is that writing about taking a vacation would be a metaphor for taking a psychic break from his onstage persona. However, as is the case with all filmed versions of Gray's monologues, the written published version varies somewhat.

In the written edition of Monster in a Box, Gray's persona states that the source of the idea of writing a novel was his literary agent, who had stated:
‘I think you have a novel in you.’ She sold the idea that I had one in me to Knopf, so I had to spit one out. But I didn’t know how I was going to write a novel because I don’t know how to make anything up, so I thought I’d write a book instead. So I began working on this book called Impossible Vacation. It started out as a very simple travelogue about how whenever my girlfriend, Renee, and I try to take a vacation, I tend to . . . "complicate it" . . . . I mean, I’m kind of a control freak and I like to create my own hells before the real ones get to me. I kind of like to beat hell to hell. The book was just going to be about me, that new England puritan, who happens to find it very difficult to take pleasure in very pleasurable places. (4)

In this passage, Gray’s character clearly establishes the context of the writing of his novel as a mirror: it will exist to reflect him. Even though a fictional form, this particular novel, because it is to be about him, and written by him (enabling him to cast himself however he decides to within the plot and in relationship to other characters) is not pure fiction. Only Gray himself knows what has been fictionalized, and what is actual. Like Narcissus, Gray creates the mirror context, although he is infinitely more aware that the self becomes an "other." Brewster North takes on a life of his own as an entity separate, in name and as part of an "other" environment, from Spalding Gray.

Gray’s persona quickly establishes another strong link with the relationship of Narcissus and the reflected image in the myth. When Narcissus first glimpses the beautiful creature under the water’s surface, he is immediately enraptured, reminiscent of Narcissus, "charmed by himself (Humphries 3.424). In the myth, Narcissus is sexually attracted to the form he sees, unaware of the real identity of the reflection. In Monster in a Box, Gray’s persona begins telling the story of starting to work on his novel at the MacDowell Writers’ Colony in Peterborough, New
Hampshire (where, incidentally, Thornton Wilder wrote Our Town, modeling Grover's Corner's on the town of Peterborough.) In the filmed version of the monologue, Gray's character explains that at the Writer's Colony, one is supposed to be able to retreat from the world in order to focus on writing, describing the freedom to "do anything [he] wanted" as "a steamy treat, let me tell you." Gray's performed character intimates, through facial expressions and gestures, that he is not-too-indirectly referring to freedom from his puritanical, repressed sexuality expressed through masturbation and sexual fantasizing.

In the published edition of Monster in a Box, Gray places his explanation of his personal purpose in writing a novel a bit later than he does in the filmed version. In addition, he provides a bit more insight. He alludes to his desire to explore the self, which can be interpreted as a figurative seeking of one's reflection in a mirror. He writes:

Now as soon as I'd signed the contract for the book, I decided that I was going to give the monologues up. Stop doing monologues and just write. I thought the monologues were making me too extroverted. I wanted to pull back into my more introverted self and go back in and explore the private self, the shadow self, the part I hadn't been in touch with for twenty years. (5-6)

At the colony, a writer is given total privacy in order to be able to escape interruptions, and to concentrate on writing. (Gray's character says that meals were eaten at the main house, except lunch, which was brought in small baskets and left on the back porch of one's studio or house.) He was given complete solitude in order to write his autobiographical novel; in essence, he was led to a mirror and allowed to gaze into the reflection. Like Narcissus, his protagonist becomes paralyzed.
When Narcissus briefly realizes it is his own image he sees reflected in the pool, he immediately denies this revelation and continues obsessively to attempt to woo the other:

So, by love wasted, slowly he dissolves
By hidden fire consumed. No colour now,
Blending the white with red, nor strength remains,
Nor will, nor aught that lately seemed so fair,
Nor longer lasts the body Echo loved. (Melville 65)

In a similar manner, Gray's persona says he also began to waste away in the solitude of the writers' colony, with no relationships with any living being other than the relationship with the self.

Like the Narcissus myth, Gray's monologue also refers to his body dissipating. He says:

. . . Needless to say, I was doing all sorts of exorcisms before I got down to the writing. Then I got down to the writing, and it was awful. I don't know why anyone would want to do it. It stinks. It's like a disease. It's an illness, writing. It steals your body from you. There's no audience. You're alone. My knuckle was swelling up. I had an arthritic knuckle from the pen pressing against it so hard while writing longhand. I was losing my sight in my left eye, which was a horrible experience, because here I was working on my Oedipal themes, and I thought, 'Oh, no, there goes the first eye.' (7)

By alluding to the developing problem with his left eye, Gray's protagonist anticipates the issues he explores in the monologue Gray's Anatomy by several years. However, the Oedipal themes he refers to at this point in Monster in a Box are actually ever-present dilemmas which have always been part of Gray's work. Here, he specifically suggests the connection to Oedipal overtones as being directly related to Monster in a Box due to his realization that for him, there are deeply rooted difficulties related to taking a vacation (ostensibly the content of the planned novel).
Gray has directly addressed the subject of his mother's suicide at age 52 (while Gray was on a solitary vacation, traveling in Mexico) in many of his earlier monologues. In *Monster in a Box*, his family's personal history has new significance within the context of the material because Gray shapes the telling of the monologue by utilizing a figurative mirror. In essence, he says that writing about taking a vacation has powerful repercussions due to the strong repressed images the writing recalls:

And in the course of writing the book, I realized that the first time I tried to take a vacation outside of the United States was when I was an actor at the Alley Theater, down in Houston, Texas, in 1967. That summer, at the end of the theater season, I went to Mexico to try to vacate and, while I was down there, my mother killed herself. And suddenly, I realized that this probably had a lot to do with why I've not been able to take a vacation very easily. And this changed the whole nature of the book, because I realized I was working with classical themes--basically about how every boy, in order to become a man, must first in some way kill his mother off. But in my case, I think my mother and I were in competition and she beat me to it. (4)

Gray clearly suggests here the "mirroring" relationship of mother and son. Very close to his mother, more so than the other two sons in Gray's family, he has frequently written about the relationship in terms of her needing him to provide a reflection of her own self. In that relationship, he provided the mirror. But in *Monster in a Box*, the novel *Impossible Vacation* (and the many detours and interruptions along the way) all provide a complex mirror back to Gray. And though he is in control, shaping the work as he goes, the issues raised conjure up long repressed dilemmas and affect Gray's physical health.
Gray’s protagonist describes his attempts at writing (about his attempts at taking a vacation) as exhausting and frustrating. He becomes like Narcissus trapped at the pool, wasting away as he compulsively pursues the reflected (self) image, denying truth. He says:

So I’m writing, writing, writing, I’m writing longhand. How long can you write longhand? Three hours? Four if you’re lucky, and your hand’s like a claw. Then what can you do in six hundred acres of woods? You go for a walk in the woods. And you walk and you walk and you walk. You go back to the main house and you drink. And you drink and you eat. And you reread what you wrote and you get up in the morning and you write. And you walk and you walk and you drink and you eat. And you reread what you wrote and you write and you walk and you drink and you drink. And you drink. I just wanted to get out of there! But how could I leave? I was in a privileged place. Something had to draw me away--some disaster. Someone had to have a heart attack. Who would it be? (7)

Like Narcissus, whose tears stirred the waters of the pool, causing the reflected image to appear unclear and elusive, Gray’s persona’s alcohol-induced haze causes him to have difficulty in maintaining a clear, undisturbed perspective.

Narcissus, frustrated by his inability to possess the adored image, laments that he cannot embrace the beloved. Ovid’s says, that “by love wasted, slowly he dissolves By hidden fire consumed” (Melville 65). Gray’s performed character also becomes consumed by a hidden fire, so that he even seems to begin to hope for a distraction, an Echo who would call him away, compelling him to leave the entrapment of the pool’s mirroring surface. For Narcissus, Echo is ever-present, and though she is “angry still and unforgiving, [she is] grieved for the hopeless boy”(65). However, Gray’s character’s figurative Echo, his longtime girlfriend Renee (who is clearly ever-present and continues to offer love) is not in the immediate setting this
time. Gray’s protagonist is hoping for some other, irresistibly compelling event to pull him away from writing in a way he could not ignore: something as serious as a threat to someone’s life.14

In Monster in a Box, Gray’s persona gets his wish whereas Narcissus does not. (Though Echo continues to call to Narcissus, he is oblivious to her because of his overwhelming obsession with the pursuit of the idealized creature under the surface of the water.) Gray’s character’s distraction comes in the form of an invitation from the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Gray’s onstage persona says that they contact him at the writer’s colony with the news that they have been awarded an NEA grant to develop a project for which they would have Spalding Gray ride LA buses to find "interesting people to be interviewed onstage about living in Los Angeles" (8). Gray’s character states that the project, to be called "LA: The Other" had one criterion: the subjects could in no way be involved in the film industry. The project itself is to be a mirror, reflecting an "other."

Los Angeles, (essentially a mirror for American culture) with its strong association with the moviemaking image of Hollywood, apparently is perceived by the Mark Taper Forum as so identified with film that anyone not connected to that industry is an "other." And for Spalding Gray’s persona, eager to escape the prison

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14In The Drama of the Gifted Child, Alice Miller has written of the idealized reflection of the self: "Echo’s answering calls deceive Narcissus. His reflection deceives him as well, since it shows only his perfect, wonderful face and not his inner world, his pain, his history. His back view, for instance, and his shadow remain hidden from him; they do not belong and are cut off from his beloved reflection" (86). Mirroring, whether in the form of a reflection or in the responses of others, is potentially deceptive.
of the self at the writer's colony, the invitation provides the desired means of escape. Here, unlike Narcissus, he is able to leave his own mirrored reflection, but only briefly. When Gray's character goes to LA, he plans to work on his novel during whatever time he has free from the Taper project. In this way, he soon discovers that the mirror which reflects his psyche has accompanied him to LA.

While in Los Angeles, Gray's protagonist is courted by several talent agencies and film producers who suggest his possible involvement in numerous acting projects, including film. Here film is a strong metaphor for a mirroring surface, largely due to the image of film as a star-producing vehicle, and to the god-like status of actors as cultural icons. To Gray's character, the prospects seem especially appealing (in addition of course, to the mirroring opportunities they would provide) because of the available health benefits. Gray's character says that he desires working in Hollywood ... because of the health insurance. If you do three weeks of work in a feature film, you get a year's worth of major medical, dental and psychiatric. So there's no way I'm looking that gift horse in any part of its anatomy. (16)

Gray's character observes that as he meets with the various film industry representatives, the LA culture of health and fitness is strongly exemplified, and the contrast to his "self-deprecating, New York, ironic" persona is invigorating. To Gray's protagonist, everyone in LA associated with film (the mirror) is idealized: healthy, health-conscious, sun-tanned and clearminded. The reflection, like the image Narcissus glimpses in Ovid's telling of the myth, is perfect, romanticized.

At the writer's colony, he had felt imprisoned, trapped by the solitude and the lack of distractions which would have provided some types of escape from
confronting long-repressed traumatic memories associated with the self. Here, in LA, his onstage persona could, for a time, utilize a different mirror, one which would reflect back to him refreshing images of health and productive work. Writes Gray about his power lunches with film executives (for whom he hoped to project a wholesome, all-American, sincere and decisive image):

I walked in and sat down at their big table. There's this round table, a marble table, and they were all there--about ten of them--men and women all suntanned windblown and healthy. Oh so healthy! There's no more drugs in Hollywood. Health is the new drug. Those people have been up since five in the morning doing kung fu, jogging, reading scripts, and eating blue-green algae from the bottom of the Oregon lakes. I'm telling you I walked in there and they were ready! I have never walked into a room and felt such a sense of readiness in my life. There was nothing happening, but they were ready for it in case it did. I walked in, and the man at the head of the table offered me the only drug left in Hollywood--a can of Diet Coke. (17-18)

The discussion which follows, ironically, provides another mirror. The conversation references Gray's filmed version of Swimming to Cambodia (itself a mirror, reflecting both the film The Killing Fields and Gray's personal experiences during filming) and Gray's resulting casting in the film Clara's Heart.

Christopher Lasch has written extensively about the cultural obsession with health, fitness and nutrition as denials of (and fear of) aging and death in The Culture of Narcissism. Lasch's 1978 work is still descriptive, nearly 20 years after publication, of many aspects of American society. He argues that in the U.S., the prevailing attitude of the 1960s and 1970s was to promote the self, to advance the self politically and culturally. Spalding Gray was, at the same time, experiencing extremely traumatic assaults to the self (the suicide of his mother, his subsequent
nervous breakdown, the development of his monologic performance mode) at the age of first becoming an adult, establishing a sense of identity for himself and for others. Lasch writes:

Every society reproduces its culture--its norms, its underlying assumptions, its modes of organizing experience--in the individual, in the form of personality. As Durkheim said, personality is the individual socialized. The process of socialization, carried out by the family and secondarily by the school and other agencies of character formation, modifies human nature to conform to the prevailing social norms. Each society tries to solve the universal cries of childhood--the trauma of separation from the mother, the fear of abandonment, the pain of competing with others for the mother's love--in its own way, and the manner in which it deals with these psychic events produces a characteristic form of personality . . . (34)

In other words, Gray's onstage persona is a product of his cultural environment, like all individuals. His personal experiences with separation from his own mother, his abandonment by her through self-inflicted death, and the competition with his father for her love heighten the identification of Gray with American culture of the late 20th century. He is indeed a child of his times, mirroring the dilemmas of society in his reflection.

It is while Gray's persona is becoming fully aware of the health-conscious environment in LA that he is trying to write a particularly painful section of the novel. He is writing about the summer of 1965 when his character, Brewster North is "desperate to get away from his mother" (11). Like his own mother, Brewster's is having a severe nervous breakdown, which he is "trying to help her get through . . . but at the same time he knows that he must get away and begin his own life or he'll never have one" (11). Brewster (the reflection of Spalding) must escape the prison
of providing the reflection for his mother (the reflection of Spalding Gray's mother.)

In Impossible Vacation, Brewster North wants to separate from his mother by
becoming an actor (interestingly desiring to pursue a profession which, by nature,
demands one perpetually become an "other" even while establishing a separate new,
inependent life.) Brewster North specifically wants to work toward Equity status at
the Alley Theater in Houston, Texas, because they are producing Chekhov's The Sea
Gull, and he believes he is perfectly suited to the role of Konstantin Gavrilovich
because "he has a relationship to his mother not unlike Konstantin has to his mother"
(11). Therefore, Spalding Gray's autobiographical character in his novel, while
providing a reflection of Gray, portrays a character who provides a reflection of him.
The effect is somewhat like the visual illusion of unending dimensions one sees when
standing in front of one mirror and facing another.

In the filmed version of Monster in a Box, Gray expands the material dealing
with his own attempts mirrored by Brewster North in Impossible Vacation, to separate
from his mother. He reinforces the connection to Lasch's view of the American
culture as being increasingly leisure oriented, describing it as "the summer of 1964...
when people were just learning how to hang out." (Gray does include, in briefer
form, in the published edition.) Gray suggests his own Oedipal conflicts when he
describes Brewster North's attempts, in the filmed version, to try "to get away from
his mother . . . . [He] had been dating her a lot that winter." There is a significant
parallel to events in Spalding Gray's relationship to his mother when he describes an
event which occurred with his own two-year-old son:
So he went through something on his own, without his father or mother. I acutely feel the loss already. I'm finding it difficult to make the transition and I think that's a mirror for what my mother went through. She just didn't make it with me. However way she did it, I don't know, keeping me attached to her, needing her, guilty, whatever the mechanisms were. And I don't think they were that conscious. They were just [related to the fact that] she needed a new lover, and she took on her son. There weren't a lot of available men around . . . . I would go to concerts with her, the movies with her, I was her date. The split is still happening. It is very difficult. That's all therapeutic stuff because I would often, in college . . . have a girlfriend who was everything sexual and the object of all that . . . and then the mother would be back on the weekends to share. I still have that in my life, I still need that, I'm still treating Renee as a mother. (Interview 27 April 1995)

Like Brewster North, Gray's persona in Impossible Vacation is still returning home, unable fully to leave for Provincetown, the symbolic separation goal. Instead, though he travels a little farther each day, he keeps turning around and going back, ending up going swimming with his mother, like Narcissus trapped at the pool.

In addition to the larger, metaphoric mirrors in Monster in a Box, there are also numerous symbolic references throughout the monologue employing many types of reflecting surfaces as figurative mirrors. One is Gray's character's trip, with Renee's character, to Nicaragua to be part of a fact-finding group for Columbia Pictures, to investigate stories of the war there for potential film ideas. Again, "film" appears as a symbol for a type of mirror, for Columbia Pictures is expressly interested in illuminating "America's illegal war" for the U.S. public (21).

This particular opportunity presents itself at the precise time Gray's persona is working through the difficult material associated with the inability to leave the mother, and provides a compelling opportunity to deny the difficulty by avoidance for
a good cause. In the filmed version, Gray’s character states that he even further rationalizes leaving the novel to go to Nicaragua as a chance "to look at the monster to see if I have any distance on it." At this point, upon his return, Gray’s character ironically wants the healthy sunshine and nutrition-related environment of California to become instead the more familiar setting of New York, a place more closely associated with his frame of mind. He says, "When is the endless sunshine going to stop? When will my body be covered in wool and corduroy so I can think again?"

Clearly, Gray’s persona is, at this point, sensing subconsciously that his physical appearance (including clothing) more than superficially reflects his persona. Instead, as in a true mirror, Gray’s persona perceives that his image (ironic, cynical, New Yorker) is the self.

Renee’s character, as she enters the story in the monologue, is an active participatory character (as opposed to the removed, referential character she has been thus far) and also provides a mirror. When they return to New York for a Thanksgiving break from California, she experiences a symptom which, suspected first of being a spider bite, gradually develops into a skin lesion she fears may be associated with AIDS. Renee, who has discovered the similarity to AIDS--caused lesions by looking at a photograph in a medical textbook, communicates her concern to Gray’s character as they wait to enter the screening of the film Moonstruck at the Museum of Modern Art. His immediate response is denial. She suggests they go in to see the film in order to forget about it for awhile. Neither seems to want to deal with the possible ramifications immediately, but both react in separate ways. Film, as
a metaphor for a mirror, provides a healthy distancing mechanism for Renee, but

Gray's persona is unable to see anything but the spectre of death reflected. He says:

She can lose herself in the movies, just walk right in and disappear. So we go in to try to forget about it for a little bit, and I'm sitting, trying to get into the movie, but every time I see Cher, I don't see Cher. I see instead the face of that sleazy, sexy, stage-door-Judy—with the very questionable sex and drug habits—that I went home with one night after a show. A long time ago. *But not long enough ago!* And every time I see that face I start barking like a dog. And Renee says, 'Spald, stop it! Do you realize you're barking inside the Museum of Modern Art?! Stop it! People are staring at you. In fact, Cher is staring at you!' I turn around and there is Cher. I can't believe that she's surrounded by an entourage of men with orange and purple hair—and she's staring at *me*? I go back, I try to watch the screen, but every time Cher is on screen, I see that sleazy, sexy Judy's face instead. And now I'm growling. I'm growling in the Museum of Modern Art!

And Renee says, 'Spald, stop it. Now we're going to have to leave. MacNeil Lehrer is behind you taking notes.' I turn around and there he is—I don't know which one—but he's there! And he's taking notes. And what's amazing is that every time I notice a celebrity looking at me, and I'm in their gaze, I'm not afraid of death or dying. (33-34)

The gaze is significant for it establishes, for this monologue, a strong link to the use of the gaze in the Narcissus myth. At the pool, the gaze of Narcissus is fixed, directed toward the adored image he sees under the water's surface. The gaze imprisons Narcissus; he is unable to break away. In *Monster in a Box*, Gray's protagonist is likewise unable to free himself. Although he says he has not "been able to analyze that one yet," Gray's character is consciously aware that the gaze of a celebrity (an "adored image") frees him somehow from the fear of AIDS and death. By receiving the attention of a celebrity, he is in the same position as is Narcissus: identity and returned love are affirmed. Gray's protagonist and Narcissus both believe that the faces they see gazing at each of them, validate them, providing reasons to live.
As Gray’s performed character in *Monster in a Box* attempts to deal with his fear of AIDS, he is simultaneously working on the part of the novel which deals with his mother’s decision to kill herself, reinforcing his obsessive thinking about death. Gray’s persona says he was trying to read to his mother from Alan Watt’s *Psychotherapy East and West* and other sources about nervous breakdowns, but that she does not return his gaze:

But she wasn’t listening. She was reading from Mary Baker Eddy’s *Science and Health* and from *The Christian Science Monitor* . . . . And I remember that day: she, curled up on the couch, a warm July day. And she had *The Christian Science Monitor* between us, like a Japanese paper wall. And I got so annoyed at not being able to get through, I just reached down and popped the paper with my finger. And she pulled the paper down and looked me right in the eyes and said, ‘How shall I do it, dear? How shall I do it? Shall I do it in the garage with the car?’ (35)

This section marks a significant point in *Monster in a Box*, for it indicates that not only did his mother need him to provide a reflected image, but he needed her for the same reason. The newspaper, placed between them and preventing his unobstructed view of her, is parallel to the troubled waters which frustrate Narcissus, a figurative reflecting pool.

Indeed, in the Narcissus myth, when the pool is disturbed, Narcissus experiences a similar type of frustration: he grieves that the image seems to be abandoning him. According to Ovid:

His tears rippled the pool, and darkly then
The troubled water veiled the fading form
And, as it vanished, ‘Stay,’ he shouted, ‘stay!’
Oh, cruelty to leave your lover so!
Let me but gaze on what I may not touch,
And feed the aching fever in my heart.’ (Melville 65)
For Narcissus, the relationship with the adored image is sexual in nature, whereas the relationship between Gray's persona and his object of desire is one of mother and son. However, in classical Freudian analysis, there are sexual reverberations in the normal separation process, and as Gray's onstage character has established, this particular relationship did have distinct Oedipal overtones.

Numerous other symbolic mirrors appear in Monster in a Box: The protagonist's LA therapist, who provides a reflection through his classical Freudian process of "the cure by talk," Gray's persona himself reflected on film in Moscow, and, in the filmed version, projected images of moving clouds (water images which reflect Gray's onstage persona). In all cases, they provide clear links to the Narcissus myth in their utilization of a reflective surface which establishes an identity of the self as an "other."

By placing his central character ("Spalding Gray") onstage, and using the first person narrative form, Gray the performer indeed tells a self-referential story. Characters who appear in Monster in a Box are, similarly, real people who also share the same names with their onstage personae. Rather than non-fiction reporting in a journalistic style, however, Gray has shaped the narration in such a way that his own perspective is always more important to the telling of the story than cold reporting of facts. The story is told through Gray's personal lens, a type of mirror which interprets perspective for the viewers; in Gray's case, he is main character, storyteller, and audience.
Apparently, Gray believes that the monologues, including Monster in a Box have not only made him more extroverted but also perhaps self-indulgently so. In the filmed version, Gray's character expresses his sense of serious doubt concerning the artistic merit of his way of working, wondering aloud if it is indeed merely a "solipsistic, narcissistic pile of poop." Referring there specifically to his writing of the autobiographical novel Impossible Vacation, it is clear that Gray's protagonist is concerned that, however therapeutic such work may be said to be, it may be that the novel (intended, presumably as any novel is, intended for a wide reading audience) only exists for his own selfish gaze. That he proceeds with both the writing of the novel, and the subsequent development of the monologue Monster in a Box anyway seems to suggest that Gray decides that this is reason enough, for the therapeutic value of such work is a valid motive.

When asked about the differences between him and his onstage persona, Gray stated:

There's a few things happening, the first thing I want to say about that and I have read the book The Double. I remember, way back, when I was in India, I don't remember it now, if you take the book, Naming your Baby, which is a Signet Classic, in it is the name 'Spalding,' and they use me as an example of someone named that, but they spell my name wrong, spell it with a U, it's funny. But the definition of 'Spalding' they give is Old English, 'a meadow cleft or cut by a stream.' So immediately you have the divided image there. Spalding is a meadow cleft or cut by a stream, and then 'gray' is the other side of it, it's a split, and then the gray area, so it even compounds it more. So I see enormous symbology in my name. Second is that I'm a classic double gemini, and I'm classically two people. I would say part of the breakup between Renee and I and ultimately between any woman and myself would be the fact that there would always have to be some other woman present, either in fantasy or in reality. The two, and I grew up with two of them, my mother and my grandmother, so I
always had two women. Two mothers. Two, two, two, two, it's too much. It's constant, and the other is that I am using myself as a study and I am making a persona, so that there are two selves there. There's the experiencer who observes and then there's the writer who observes the life and then plays it so that—and Renee was very good at directing me because she was in on the original event, so in the case of the eye, and this is where I have to figure out the 'I,' splitting the 'eye,' the I, [in Gray's Anatomy] she said, 'Remember what you were really like, when you were going through that period. I will tell you what you were like, and we will reenact that fear.' So I'm acting, I'm a classic Method actor. A Method actor takes the internal life and puts it in the character. I am wearing the Method on the outside. I am an inverted Method actor. I am taking the personal life and acting it, so there are two parts there, at least two parts. There's the Spalding Gray that is living, and the Spalding Gray that claims the persona. Now, actually I see that as a healthy remedy to suicide, because one of my theories about suicide is the schizoid personality. The self gets so divided that one self kills the other part, it actually happens. (Interview 27 April 1995, 7-8)\textsuperscript{15}

In the same interview, Gray had earlier expressed his previous confusion whenever anyone asked about the possible therapeutic value of his work. Because his publicly performed monologues have, for the most part, dealt with traumatic events of Gray's life, even as he subtly infuses humor in the telling, individuals have asked if working in his particular way has a healing benefit. Gray responded in the interview that he found the creation of an eponymous character, which had a life of his own, to be helpful:

\textsuperscript{15}See Otto Rank's chapter "Narcissism and the Double" in The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study. In this chapter, Rank explores the struggle to-the-death between the character and the character's double, referring to the "death significance of the double" as closely related to "narcissistic meaning . . . . [T]he death meaning of the double. . . . [is related to] the narcissistic infatuation in one's own image and self. . . . ." (69-70) Rank Also writes extensively of the relationship of the double to the Narcissus legend in terms of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray as the work which, at the time of his writing, most clearly illustrated his concept of the double and the compulsive attraction to the self's reflection, both literal and figurative.
So my way of eliminating the double is integrating it through art. I see that as, it's interesting we're coming to this now and talking—I've never quite seen this, when people ask me how my work is therapeutic, I get a little vague, and I say, well, I live in a fragmented world and it's a way of making a history in a time that is without history, or something like that. But this other one is also true, this other analysis, of how it's therapeutic, and that is healing the double by giving it a full grade of place. Now, I've also had images of myself as a collage artist, and that I am simply putting scraps of my life together into a narrative and a part of me pushes. One part of me is Humpty Dumpty, and the other part is this little sneaky guy that comes up behind the egg and pushes it, and then goes down and picks him up, you know, like all the king's horses. (8)

In Monster in a Box, the many references to Impossible Vacation (which in a distanced manner tells the story of his mother's suicide) the imagery of "reflection" comes into play in its sense of "memory" as well as a "referring back" to a related work or idea. And it is clear that the monologue, ostensibly about the distractions and detours during the writing of the novel, is really about the mirroring between the self and the onstage persona (on one level) and between the self and his mother (on a much deeper level.)

Gray revealed more insight into his way of working when he discussed his relationship with his mother as a mirror in the same interview:

The audience is a form of mirror and if I were to look at the mirror concept of my mother, it's rather complicated, but what I think I'm doing is: If I as a child, (theoretically, this is one of my theories,) ran to my mother in panic, she probably did a number of mirrors. You see, I don't spend a lot of time thinking and talking about a theory in my work. I would, if I was working on a book where I would want to include that, but the audience as a mirror is probably a very subtle and important thing that's going on. And what happened and why it's important for me now to have a live audience as opposed to just writing in a room alone, is that the reader is not going to be a mirror for me, right? So a live performance is very important. Now, probably some of the things that happened with my mother was that I came to her and
she couldn’t accept my fear and she gave back the smile. This is where it gets subtle, she gave back the Christian Science denial smile that everything is fine. For instance, when I was 14 I burned my arms severely, third-degree burns, and came downstairs, and she just said, "Put some soap on it, dear, and know the truth." Now, I still have a huge scar on my arm. I was walking in with my arm dripping like a piece of bloody roast beef, and I know, and Renee pointed this out to me, any mother’s natural instinct would be to grab, and she would read that of course, of giving in to the reality of it, and she was in denial and that incident when I was 14 was what made me begin to break with Christian Science, cause I went to my father and he took me to the Doctor and I went with oremycin and it could have gotten seriously infected. And he changed it, she wouldn’t change it. We became very close then, we bonded through that because she would not tend to my arm, she would not acknowledge it. You have a strange kind of denial, but you have the smile, you see, but what happens is that you begin to pick up on the shadow of the child, when he no longer sees. The child doesn’t see the mother’s fear, but sees the denial of it, they are going to introject or incorporate the fear. They are going to see it, any child will see it. And any child that’s ten or eleven years old doesn’t know how to make boundaries, they introject, they take it in. I have my mother in me, still, because I was doing a major introjection because she was laying a big trip on me. (21-22)

Whereas all of Gray’s monologues deal with events based on his life, Monster in a Box uses the symbolic reference to a "mirror" much more extensively than any other. It is especially significant that the definitive function of a mirror is "to reflect," for Gray employs reflection in several important ways; first, as a means of projecting an image of the self like a literal mirror, in creating an onstage self-referential character, and second, as a synonym for thinking back and interpreting memory. It is fitting, then, that Gray’s protagonist concludes Monster in a Box with commentary on the final lines of Thornton Wilder’s Our Town (in which he played the stage manager in Broadway revival of 1989). Gray finishes the three month run of Our Town at the same time he has just finished Impossible Vacation. Brewster
North has made it to Bali and lies under the stars contemplating his earlier vacation, from which he returned to find his mother's ashes in a box. In a final mirror, Brewster North thinks momentarily of writing a short story about how he feels about that, but decides simply to take a vacation instead. Gray's protagonist in *Monster in a Box*, like Narcissus at the pool, is attracted to attributes of the reflected image he admires, attributes he unknowingly possesses: "Everything attracts him, That makes him so attractive" (Humphries *preface*).
THE BOY HIMSELF, ELUSIVE ALWAYS . . . AN ALWAYS FLEEING IMAGE

The monologues of Spalding Gray, by virtue of being based on the writer's life and experiences, all function as figurative mirrors, to different degrees. As a monologist whose performance pieces are self-referential, Gray knowingly places himself in a position where he is open to audience scrutiny and speculation as to how much of the material is true, how much is fictionalized. With his novel, Impossible Vacation, Gray tells a story of a phase of his life in a manner which is more distanced than in the monologues where he is represented by an onstage character who shares his own name. Impossible Vacation is a novel, a work of fiction, in which characters have given names which are not the names of real people in the real life of the artist, Spalding Gray. By this use of distancing, Gray possibly reveals more than he does in his performed monologues, due to the freedom the fictionalizing permits.

However, in another way Impossible Vacation is, like the monologues, still a type of symbolic mirror. The novel reflects, figuratively, the creative imagination of Spalding Gray, the writer, whose works are concerned with stories based on real situations, relationships and circumstances from his own life. In the novel, he does
so in an obscuring manner: we are, as readers, much less certain about whether or not events actually occurred, or if characters are based on real people. We are likewise unsure about how much the novel's narrator resembles the writer in character and personality.

By consulting other works by Spalding Gray, we are given numerous clues. Many events, characters and situations which appear in the novel refer, directly or indirectly, to events recounted in the monologues, or bear striking similarities to people with whom Gray has shared experiences, as related in his first-person monologues. In this way, it can be seen that all of Gray's works perform as another set of mirrors: by referring to each other, by recalling this event, that relationship, the inter-connected novel and monologues could also be described as self-referential. Like a series of reflecting surfaces placed at angles to each other, when considered together they reveal many different perspectives (all related in some way) of the works of Spalding Gray which have as their foundation, the self as text.

Monster in a Box, for example, is inextricably connected to Impossible Vacation: the entire monologue is the story of the various frustrations encountered as Gray worked on the novel. Without having had the experience of writing Impossible Vacation, Spalding Gray would not have had the basis for a new monologue. The two works, being so directly interdependent, function as the most complete object/mirror of all of Gray's works.

In Impossible Vacation, the suggestion of mirroring is again reminiscent of Ovid's telling of the Narcissus myth, particularly because it is, again, the self which
is being reflected. Impossible Vacation deals with especially crucial issues related to
the self: separation of a son from a mother, fleeing the real in search of the ideal,
trying to establish a sense of identity. These particular crises of the self, like those in
the monologues of Spalding Gray, also recall aspects of the Narcissus myth which
parallel them. In Impossible Vacation, the dilemmas explored resonate with the next
part of the myth's narrative: the pursuit of the elusive, ideal boy.

When Narcissus gazes into the pool, in Ovid's telling of the myth, he sees an
image to which he is immediately attracted:

[Narcissus] finds the boy, elusive always.
Not knowing what he sees, but burning for it.
The same delusion mocking his eyes and teasing
Why try to catch an always fleeing image,
Poor credulous youngster? (Humphries)

In this portion of the tale, several important aspects of the Narcissus myth are
reinforced: the idea of a reflected image, the suggestion that the desire for the being
or creature seen is obsessive, and the communication to the reader that Narcissus is
unaware that the object of his compulsive desire is the self. In addition, an element
of the myth is introduced here which profoundly affects key issues of Narcissus's
attraction. We are told that Narcissus finds the "boy" irresistibly attractive, and
within that one word are contained two crucial concepts: that Narcissus is aware of
the reflected image's gender as male and that he is attracted in an erotic manner to
that image, and by the choice of words, we are reminded of the image's youthfulness.

In A.D. Melville's translation of the Metamorphoses, the description of the
scene does not identify the sexuality or physical appearance as male as clearly:
Not knowing what he sees, he adores the sight;
That false face fools and fuels his delight.
You simple boy, why strive in vain to catch
A fleeting image? (64)

However, though it is less direct, the boy Narcissus, having been earlier described as beautiful and beloved by boys and girls alike, clearly is attracted to physical qualities which are at least androgynous in nature. And the remaining issues still come through in this translation as in Humphries's: that Narcissus is himself very youthful (even childlike,) that he is attracted to youthfulness as reflected by the image he sees under the surface of the water, and that he is obsessively attracted to androgynous or male physical qualities.

Although both Humphries and Melville indicate that, at least at this point in the myth, Narcissus is unaware that the image he strives in vain to possess is, in fact, his own, we as readers do know it. Unlike Narcissus, Spalding Gray's persona knowingly seeks and explores the self in the very writing of his monologic performance pieces. In another way, he has also explored aspects of the self by writing his only (to date) novel, *Impossible Vacation*. Published by Knopf in 1992, the novel was written at the urging of Gray's agent, Suzanne Gluck, who had told him, "I think you have a novel in you" (*Impossible Vacation* preface). Even though the work is not intended for performance, it is nevertheless a monologue, in several respects.

*Impossible Vacation* is written in the first person, and tells the story of Brewster North's attempt to at last take a vacation. The quality of essentially "hearing" a monologue is maintained throughout the novel by the use of the first
person, to be sure, but even more significantly, the style of language (direct, ironic, personal) contribute to the sense of the work as being, like his performed monologues, a story told and listened to. *Impossible Vacation* is also an autobiographical novel, which Gray has described as being "about 80 percent true" (Merchant, 27 April 95), only having "changed names to disguise the guilty" (*Monster in a Box* 5). Because the character of Brewster North is autobiography based, it can be perceived as another incarnation of Spalding Gray's onstage persona, Spalding Gray.

The portion of the Narcissus myth, as told by Ovid quoted above refers to several elements which resonate in Gray's novel, namely: youthfulness (especially of a male child) and an attraction to youthfulness, an elusive figure which is always fleeing, and which turns out to be an aspect of an idealized self, and water as a source of rejuvenation. *Impossible Vacation* begins as Brewster North relates his mother's "never-ending passion for the sea" (3). Immediately, in that first sentence of the novel, he suggests a subtle correlation to the Narcissus myth. In *Metamorphoses* we are told that Narcissus's mother was a water nymph named Liriope, a "lovely sprite" (Melville 61). As Gray's persona begins the narrative of a boy's memory of traveling to his grandmother's house in Sakonnet, Rhode Island, with his family, images of water are very strong: the family is traveling to a summer house near the ocean and a river, the smell of the sea becomes stronger and more compelling as the family approaches the destination, and the family settles down for a
picnic lunch on the sand. The narrator tells us that this particular memory is of a day in July when he was five years old, and he heard the word "Bali" for the first time.

This moment is the inciting incident of the plot, for Bali becomes the actual and symbolic destination established as a goal by the narrator, Brewster North, and the pursuit of this goal becomes every bit as obsessive as Narcissus's pursuit of his idealized love, and takes on qualities of an epic journey as frustrations prevent his travels. In addition, the fact that Brewster North does become trapped along the way, at many points which prevent his progress, strengthens the parallel to Narcissus because of the entrapment. Narcissus is unable, and unwilling, to leave the pool, denying the world around him and limiting his existence to the immediate environment of the water. Brewster North is not as limited in movement as Narcissus, who stays literally in one setting. North, however, though he does move in an almost epic narrative as the plot develops, stays in one place figuratively until the novel's conclusion, where he emerges from the Grand Canyon.

Impossible Vacation really begins with Gray's dedication page, "To My Mother, the Creator and Destroyer." Before the novel opens, the reader is thus very conscious of the presence of a mother as a compelling force: someone who has the power to create a new individual (a "self") by giving birth, and to end life (her own and, it is implied, the existence of an "other") but in what way or sense we do not yet know. But as the novel progresses, we come to understand that Brewster North and his mother are doubles, both having identities merged with the other and being, in both a physical and a metaphoric sense, made of the same body. For example,
Brewster recounts that on the July day he first heard the world "Bali," his mother had told him that her brother, Brewster's uncle Jib, had returned from Bali and had brought him something: "a crazy wooden monkey mask . . . like no other mask or toy I'd ever seen or touched before . . . ." (5) As the five-year-old Brewster spins in joy on the beach, laughing in delight and sharing in his mother's happiness that her brother has returned and is reunited with her and her child on a beautiful sunlit day at the beach, he experiences a defining moment:

He guided a larger leather strap over my head and I was suddenly in a foreign, faraway world that smelled of rough smoky wood and weathered leather and I felt the animal spirit of the monkey go into my face and my body and through those little wooden eye openings. I suddenly saw things as different and faraway. I could hear Mom laughing in her distant beach chair. I could see Mom's laughing eyes tear up as I became half child and half monkey in her eyes . . . . Mom's laughter mixed with the sound of waves breaking and I spun and spun in the protection of Mom's gaze and I was not dizzy because in my eyes there was a new abstract world and I knew I was safe spinning in Mom's eyes and Mom's laughter . . . . That day another place was born in my body and in my mind, which was then all imagination and no thinking. (5-6)

Here, Brewster is at once aware of his existence within his mother's gaze, reflected in her eyes, and at the same time as a part of a different, new and exotic locale. He senses he is pulled in several directions, but the image of his identity as secure and reflected within the mother is the stronger of the two images at this point in the narrative.

The strong sense of self Brewster perceives as a reflection of his mother establishes, for the reader, a corresponding awareness of the symbiotic bond between this particular mother and this particular son. Alice Miller writes of this mother-child
mirroring relationship extensively in her *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1944). In this work (a revision of her 1978 version) Miller addresses the mirroring nature of the mother-child relationship and the relevance that aspect of their intertwined lives has to the development of a healthy sense of self in both the mother and the child. She writes:

> Every child has a legitimate need to be noticed, understood, taken seriously, and respected by his mother. In the first weeks and months of life he needs to have the mother at his disposal, must be able to avail himself of her and be mirrored by her. (52)

It is clear that the five-year-old Brewster senses this keenly, and is secure in his mother's mirroring of him.\(^{16}\)

At this point, the parallel to the Narcissus myth is found in the concept of the mirror: as a figurative pool, which provides a reflection, the boy perceives himself as reflected in his mother's eyes and feels safe. The mother's eyes are the reflecting pool/mirror for his sense of secure identity. At the same time, the mother's sense of self is also secure. As she sees her self (her life) reflected in her child, her brother and the nurturing environment of the sea, she is safe as well.

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\(^{16}\)For contrasting interpretations of the mirroring effect of the mother, see *Playing and Reality* by D. W. Winnicott and *Ecrits* by Lacan. For Lacan, the infant, around the age of six months, first sees a reflected image of the self and experiences self-ness as unified in one place. Lacan believed that the mirror offered a false promise which was deeply misleading, offering a sense of completeness which would forever elude the individual in reality. For Winnicott, the mirror is figurative. Winnicott believed the "mirror" is the responsive face of the mother, giving an infant a sense of separate individuality by virtue of the returned gaze of the nurturing caregiver. For more on Winnicott's belief concerning the mirroring mother, see also the biography *Winnicott* by Phillips.
Soon, however, as the boy begins to separate from the mother, establishing a sense of independent destiny and selfhood distinct from that of his mother, the water is symbolically rippled: the two images (mother and son) no longer reflect each other exactly. The boy's mother reads him a story about a penguin, unhappy with the cold, who eventually reaches a tropical island, where he is then dissatisfied because he is too hot. Brewster's childlike imagination leads him to draw certain life lessons from the tale, in a way which anticipates Spalding Gray's onstage persona's quest for the "perfect moment" of Swimming to Cambodia:

I remember being there in bed thinking, or imagining--because back then there was no difference between thinking and imagining--that the island [the penguin] went to was Bali and that this book, this story that Mom was showing me, was somehow, although I had no words for it then, a lesson about dissatisfaction and the impossibility of ever attaining any earthly paradise. At the same time that monkey mask on the wall was calling me away from our island of roads to some other palm-treed island in my mind. That monkey face was calling me away from Mom. We all had fun as our wonderful summers blended together in Sakonnet, although I could never lie on that beach again without thinking of Bali. Then after a while I just accepted that as a part of my life, accepted that forever I would always be a little bit in the place that I was not, a little bit in my body and a lot in my imagination. (7)

Here, Brewster is coming to a gradual understanding of his identity as a separate and distinct being. In addition, he is also developing an awareness that his personality, his sense of self, is somewhat fragmented, and that indeed he perceives himself as being a part of another place, present to some extent within his physical body, but to a greater extent, alive more fully in his imagination. In his imagination, he can become an idealized self living within a "paradise," or perfect, idealized environment. By giving voice to this realization, even if only privately and with the
wording of a child, the five-year-old Brewster has taken an important step in establishing a sense of his own identity: he has attempted to integrate the various aspects of the self in order to make sense of his world, and his place within it.

As Brewster's mother begins to evidence symptoms of an emotional breakdown, Brewster and his brothers are separated, to reduce her stress. Brewster is sent to stay with his grandmother for the summer, and he keenly feels the loss. He says, "I missed Mom and Mom's eyes on me" (10). Brewster misses the mirroring gaze of his mother, for it provides more than the knowledge that he has her full attention. Even more significantly, Brewster's mother's gaze gives him a stronger sense of self: by seeing himself reflected in her eyes, his perception of self is affirmed and secure.

With this setting so firmly established very early in the novel, Spalding Gray has suggested a framework which is repeated throughout the rest of Impossible Vacation. The metaphor of a mirror (a symbolic pool which reflects one's image, or another's image) serves as a reminder of the novel's structure: "reflection" (especially as a synonym for analyzing one's memories) as a means of understanding one's existence.

Numerous portions of Impossible Vacation subtly reinforce the structure of the novel as a kind of mirror by referring to previously performed, published monologues (directly or by relating a passage which bears striking similarity to part of a monologue) or by anticipating future monologues. Impossible Vacation, published in 1992, contains several anecdotes, for example, which are later included in the
autobiographical monologues *Gray's Anatomy* (published in 1994) and his current work-in-progress, *It’s a Slippery Slope* (scheduled to open at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in September 1996.) Specific portions of *Impossible Vacation* which mirror elements of other Gray works (all monologues intended for live performance) include the reference to Brewster North’s mother asking her son how she should commit suicide, asking specifically about using the car (to generate carbon monoxide) in the garage of the family home (31), which corresponds to Spalding Gray’s onstage persona’s recounting of a parallel incident in *Monster in a Box* (4, 11, 34-35) and *Gray’s Anatomy* (10-11). Obviously, such a traumatic event (which, in Spalding Gray’s own life did occur in the same way he describes it in his self-reflexive monologues and *Impossible Vacation*: while he was away, pursuing his Actor’s Equity union status and unable to be reached by mail or telephone) has affected his writing in immeasurable ways. It is especially so because of Gray’s closeness to his own mother, and the devastating effect it had on his life is naturally reflected in the philosophical bases of his writing.

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17 Many parallels exist within this one specific portion of *Impossible Vacation*. Brewster North’s mother commits suicide while he is working at the Alamo Theatre (49) whereas Spalding Gray’s own mother did so shortly after he had been working in Houston at the Alley Theatre, as he vacationed in Mexico. In *Impossible Vacation*, Brewster North’s father tells him of his mother’s death (57) in a manner corresponding directly to the way Spalding Gray describes his own experience as told in *Monster in a Box* and *Gray’s Anatomy*. The closest similarity to Brewster North’s experience in *Impossible Vacation* is in the monologue *Monster in a Box*. Here, Gray’s onstage persona recounts the day his mother asked about what manner of suicide she should choose, even to the detail of his popping of the paper between them with his snapped finger.
In addition to the very fundamental connection of this portion of *Impossible Vacation* to his performed monologues, other important references appear throughout the novel, notably his theatre group's performance at an elementary school (of a work strongly reminiscent of Gray's own experiences with a touring theatrical company (69-70). Other similarities of special significance include *Impossible Vacation*’s incidents related to Gray's autobiographical experience, with his grandparents, discussing the suicide of his mother (their daughter.) In *Impossible Vacation*, Brewster North’s conversation with his grandparents is a nearly--exact duplication of the wording Gray quotes in his 1996 work-in-progress, *It’s a Slippery Slope*:

Grandpa Benton stopped him and said, ‘No more. I don’t want to talk about it. No more.’ Gramma Benton quickly followed with, ‘She’s better off in heaven now. We know that. She’s better off in heaven.’ (76)

In addition, Brewster North’s experiences with the Bhagwan at the ashram in *Impossible Vacation* mirror Spalding Gray’s persona’s experiences. Significantly, Brewster North mentions that an attraction, for him, to experimenting with ashram living is the possibility of "anonymous Dionysian sex," an idea freely explored in numerous monologues, most notably *Gray’s Anatomy*. Brewster North specifically mentions that Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, whose ashram he plans to visit in India, advocates a "homeopathic sex cure" which frees individuals trapped by "sexual

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14In *Impossible Vacation*, the experimental theatre company is called the Rex Duffy Laboratory Theatre. Their experimental work, *The Tower*, seems to be based on Gray’s experience with an experiment at theatre group directed by Tony Abeson, which also developed a work based on the Tower of Babel story.
hangups," enabling them to "enter greater spiritual realms" (95). The dilemmas of sexual adventure and sexual exploration are strong recurring issues in virtually all of the monologues of Spalding Gray.

Gray's novel recalls and anticipates elements of past and future autobiographical monologues in a way which suggests an interior, mirroring relationship. In another sense, Impossible Vacation also provides an exterior mirror by reflecting many elements of the Narcissus myth, outside of and larger than Gray's persona, looking outward for connections rather than inward. Spalding Gray, a writer and performer whose works explore narcissistic dilemmas and issues related to narcissism, does so in Impossible Vacation by presenting a story of a youthful American Everyman, trapped at the reflecting pool. In Impossible Vacation, Brewster North represents every baby boomer who has ever struggled with the pressures related to coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s: sexuality, alternative religious and spiritual beliefs, drug experimentation, narcissism, identity.

Numerous references occur in Impossible Vacation which relate directly to specific elements of the Narcissus myth, and some indirect references are included as well. For example, elements from other sources related to Greek mythology are utilized in Impossible Vacation to establish a connection between the novel itself and a myth-related setting in the mind of the reader. Indirect references which relate to or suggest Greek mythology include the issues of mother-son separation (suggesting the Oedipal conflict, a dilemma so-named by Freud because of its correlation to the Oedipus myth and its complex mother/son attraction) and numerous subtle references to mythology and ritual, particularly Dionysian revelry.
However, the strongest connection is to the specific Narcissus myth, as related according to Ovid, containing these elements: water/pool imagery, mirrors (reflecting surfaces, figurative "pools," photographs (and film) as symbols of reflecting mirrors, the "gaze" (related to the obsessive gaze of Narcissus, directed toward his own reflection,) the suggestion of an androgynous or homoerotic attraction, and the pursuit of the self as an "other."\(^{19}\)

Although these connections to the story of Narcissus are very specific to Ovid's telling of the myth, it is nevertheless important to first consider the more general resonances of Greek mythology in Impossible Vacation, for they are used in a significantly precise way. All elements which refer, directly or indirectly, to Greek mythology in general or specifically to the tale of Narcissus do so to reinforce the issue of the pursuit of an ever-elusive boy. This recurring thread shapes Impossible Vacation, whether the sought-after "boy" is Brewster North's sense of personal identity, his experimentation with homosexuality, or any aspect of seeking the self, or establishing a sense of sexual identity and belonging. In addition, the experiences of Brewster North (even as he experiences heterosexual relationships) by virtue of their basis in the real "story" of Spalding Gray, establish a sense of "other," for Brewster North is a reflected image of the self of Spalding Gray.

\(^{19}\) In the Narcissus myth, Ovid describes the youth's obsessive desire to possess the image in the pool, not realizing, except for a very brief moment followed almost immediately by a denial of the knowledge, that the image is his own. Because it is, all the while, his reflection, the image is the "self," even though Narcissus does not perceive it as such. Instead, he believes the image, the object of his compulsive desire, to be an "other"; hence the framing of his perception as "the self as other."
An undercurrent runs through the entirety of *Impossible Vacation*: the pervasive, recurrent idea of the complex mother/son relationship in Brewster North’s family. Brewster recounts his awareness of his relationship to his mother in a way which is both innocent and incestuous when he contemplates his own birth, his literal emergence as a "self." It is interesting that these particular thoughts come to his mind when he enters, for the first time, the gay baths of Amsterdam:

> It wasn’t bad. It was only new, or maybe not so much new as it was tapping some deep recollection of how everything must have first smelled when I was squeezing out of mom, that one and only time, and then just for a moment I had a flash of how incredible my birth had been . . . I and my brothers had actually lived inside that place, and we had swum out of it, squeezed out of it. (135)

The description of the smell of the surroundings further suggest a setting much like Narcissus at the pool: he likens it to "a smell of seaweed and algae rotting at the bottom of a pond" (135). The gay baths, places of water, are here very effective in subtly reminding Brewster (and the reader) of the "primordial" smells associated with water as rejuvenator. Further, Brewster describes the life cycle of birth, sexuality and fertility, and death, in a manner which recalls Greek mythologic connections of fertility, harvest, and death: "The little room was deliciously repulsive. It was filled with the leftover smell of perpetual sex to the point that the room itself seemed exhausted and close to death" (135). Far from describing the Amsterdam bathhouses as attractive and wholesome, Gray’s imagery conjures up mental images of mildew, dank and dark rooms, and anonymous sexual activity as related to Dionysian elements
of rituals of sexual orgies, decay and rotting vegetation. While Brewster is at once attracted and repulsed, the scene is clear in establishing the setting as decadent, reminiscent of Dionysian revelries involving "obscene satyrs" (135).

The imagery related to his essential relationship to his mother reveals an issue with which Spalding Gray perpetually struggles as a writer and as a self-referential performer. Numerous passages in Impossible Vacation return to this relationship, using various metaphors and subtle references to reinforce the development of the narrative in a particular way: as an epic journey of sorts experienced by a perpetual son bound to a perpetual image of a mother. Brewster North, as Gray's alter ego, watches a seagull consume an eel one afternoon on the beach, fascinated as he and his mother witness the ritual: "We watched it all together, Mom and I, our eyes like one common eye or sometimes even with Dad's binoculars, which were like the eyes he had left at home while he went off to work." (15) In this passage, Brewster reveals his sense of self as bound to his mother's persona. By sharing "one common eye," the image becomes one also of a shared gaze or sense of perception.

Brewster North then details his adolescent conflict of needing to be both united with, and separate from, his mother. He says that, in those days of endlessly lying

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20 In Ovid's telling of the Narcissus myth, as translated by A.D. Melville, rape imagery is a part of the story. Narcissus was conceived as a result of the rape of his mother, the water-myth Liriope, by Cephus. The parallel to this portion of the myth to Impossible Vacation is found in Brewster North's description of his initiation to the world of anonymous, gay sexual encounters in the Amsterdam bath houses: "... this man who guided me with a willful roughness that was irresistible because it was like nothing I had ever remembered feeling before ... he pulled me in and threw me down on an empty bed ... . (135)
on the beach and swimming all afternoon with his mother, he would at times suddenly become aware of a strong need to be alone, away from the gaze of his mother.

Although he needed time alone, he says, he was troubled and conflicted by that need:

... just to get away from Mom, I'd go upstairs to my bedroom ... without any apparent complication or ramification, only the uneasy thought of mom still stretched out and waiting for me there below my window by the bay in that sea yard. But I really wanted to fly the nest; a big part of me wanted to get out of there ... I needed to get away from Mom. It was too sticky and warm to be right. (16-17)

Other references to the Oedipal conflict as encountered by Brewster are numerous. As he enters college, he establishes a practice of coming home on weekends where he relates to his mother in a specific manner:

... she would be my date. I'd usually take her to the last Bergman film and then we'd stay up late talking all of this real serious talk about loss of faith and wild creeping doubt, and God, and religion. We'd talk about how all of Bergman's characters had lost touch with God. (18)

This issue is further explored as Brewster narrates his experiences with dating relationships as his college days continue, all the time influenced by Oedipal mother/son imagery. He reveals that he lost his virginity to a girl named Pam, correlating his sexual arousal to aspects of the situation which recalled subliminal memories of his mother (19). Brewster then, a year later, dates a girl named Kathy, saying of her that "... a good part of my attraction to her was her name. She had the same first name as Mom--Katherine ..." (19)

Later, in another relationship, Brewster experiences a sense of conflict due to his need for his girlfriend, Melissa, for his physical needs, and his mother for his emotional needs. At this time, Brewster's mother has been committed to a sanitarium after a nervous breakdown, and he says:
I began to realize that I didn’t need Melissa as a friend because I still had Mom. I was just waiting for Mom to get out of that rest home so I could talk with her. And although Melissa didn’t openly talk about that split in me, I think she intuited it and reacted accordingly.

(25)

Melissa leaves for the summer.

Brewster’s mother at this time, is away at the sanitarium unable to prevent the complete breakdown, which the family had hoped to ward off through medication.

She had been having shock treatments and Brewster says that the effects were wearing off: she would engage in a ritual of asking Brewster repeatedly (obsessively) if she had been a good mother. His response places the relationship in perspective of Ovid’s Narcissus myth very clearly, with Brewster’s father cast as Echo:

She’d turn to me and say, ‘Do you think I stole you away from your father? Do you think I was a good mother?’ These questions left me very uneasy and confused. Deep down inside I thought that if she’d been a good mother I’d be able not to be there, I’d be off with my own woman. I wanted in the worst way to fly, just fly this nest and get out, but I still couldn’t. When I was sixteen and Cole was nineteen, Mom would sometimes take a bath in the upstairs bedroom and not lock the door, and Cole and I, instead of using the downstairs bathroom, would go upstairs to pee while we looked over our shoulder at her. It was like this odd kind of peep show. She'd let us look as long as we wanted, which was never very long: before we could get a good and steady look, Dad would come to the bottom of the stairs shouting, ‘Are you fellows . . . up there in that bathroom with your mother again? I don’t like that one bit, and I don’t want to have to come up there!’ (28)

Here, Brewster longs to gaze at his mother, with her in place as the object of his curious and obsessive desire. He engages in this ritual with his brother, another type of double, a reflection of the self. But most significantly, it is the placement of Brewster’s father as a figurative Echo, a figure plaintively calling from a distance, left out of the ritual of the gaze.
As Brewster’s mother continues her descent into depression, he becomes aware that she will eventually kill herself, and he senses that his innocent youthful existence is gone forever. The adult world of responsibility is encroaching, and the relationship he has had with his mother is at an end. After she has asked him about whether she should commit suicide in the garage, with the car, Brewster says:

I made no effort to hide the keys to either of the cars. I did not tell Dad what she had said to me. It was as though Mom and I had made one last private pact together. (31)

He mourns the coming loss of his mother, so inextricably bound to his sense of self, for he knows that by losing her, he loses a reflection of his persona. The elusive boy becomes more elusive, as grief and adulthood loom on the horizon.

The Oedipal overtones in Impossible Vacation come more to the forefront as the novel progresses, and Brewster befriends, Meg, the sister of an old friend’s girlfriend. The friendship enables him to relate to a woman in a more mature way than he has with previous girlfriends. It soon becomes apparent to him, however, that his relationship with Meg reflects another relationship:

It wasn’t long before I was falling for Meg in some new strange way that didn’t have to do with sex as much as it had to do with friendship and just being comfortable together. This new experience of friendship with a woman other than Mom was a little confusing to me. I didn’t know if I was falling in love or looking for a new mother or what. But I realized that Meg looked somewhat like my mom at that age. She had a very angular New England face, with a strong jaw and high cheekbones and very clear hazel eyes. She was the kind of woman who, in the old days when everyone got married, would have made a very beautiful bride. Also ‘Meg’ was short for ‘Margaret,’ which was Mom’s middle name. I’m not saying I didn’t miss sex—I really did miss it. But I didn’t miss the anxiety that sex produced. Good sex was like a drug for me and it could not be had without some unnerving side effects. The whole world seemed crazy to
me then in 1966, what with the Vietnam War, people taking drugs, free love and sex, and the constant image in my mind of Mom at the asylum getting another electric shock treatment. Or the image of Dad at home alone, drinking bourbon until he fell on the floor. It was a crazy time for me and I felt perpetually wounded by all that came at me. (37)

Brewster, trying to separate from his mother at the same time he is attempting to form a healthy relationship with Meg, is engaged in a crisis of self. Gray’s placement of Brewster’s dilemma in 1966 is also significant, for it aligns with Christopher Lasch’s argument about the narcissism of the culture. The references to the Vietnam War, the free use of hallucinogenic drugs, the sexual revolution, and the culture’s seeming loss of sanity as symbolized by Brewster’s mother all provide clear connections to Lasch’s critique of the narcissistic culture.

Brewster’s isolation and despair, cited above, as he witnesses the alcohol-induced “unconsciousness” (a literal definition of the term, for Brewster’s father seeks inebriation as a release from awareness) of his father, and the perception of himself as “perpetually wounded” during a “crazy time” are symptomatic of a self seeking a meaningful existence. Lasch, in discussing the search for a self identity, states that the tendency of Americans during this time (the 1960s) to try to “find” or at least “seek” the self, often led to an extreme sadness, rather than a sense of fulfillment. According to Lasch, “The ideology of personal growth, superficially optimistic, radiates a profound despair and resignation. It is the faith of those without faith.” (The Culture of Narcissism 51) This description certainly describes the predicament of Brewster North, for he begins a kind of spiritual odyssey at this point in the narrative. With Meg, he begins a journey in search of the self, having given up on
any type of rescue or intervention by God. As a young man left without any faith in
the God of his early training, he looks for the self. Essentially, he has just adopted a
new religion, which he pursues fervently.

After this point, the Oedipal references are few. In the first 37 pages of the
novel, the Oedipal conflict is a very directly addressed issue. The next overtly
Oedipal reference does not occur until nearly 25 pages later, where Meg is referred
to, almost in passing, as a mother figure for Brewster: "Meg was this great organizer
and mover, a new mother of sorts" (61). Brewster notes this as Meg busily moves
their belongings into an apartment they have taken together. They are establishing a
home, with Meg as the mother, setting up housekeeping. Brewster says:

I was secretly glad that Meg had not chosen to settle in the East
Village, because I did not really want to be living with a bunch of
drugged-out hippies. I longed for some sort of stable, conservative
environment, and that was exactly what we were in. (61)

It is no wonder that Brewster longs for a stable home environment, for it is
immediately after his mother has committed suicide that he decides to move in with
Meg, in a New York City apartment. After this, Impossible Vacation only indirectly
suggests the Oedipal conflict with which Brewster continually struggles. The only
overt reference, after this portion of the novel, comes nearly 70 pages later, as
Brewster narrates the story of his recuperation from an illness he had apparently
contracted during his travels in India. Brewster, staying with friends in Amsterdam,
misses Meg (who is still in India) and examines the bookshelf in his room to pass the
time. He finds The Grammar of Living, which he describes as:
filled with all these lusty, sexy sixties stories, told under the guise of teaching the reader how the nuclear family, with its accompanying Oedipal problems, had to be broken down and destroyed immediately, so we could all become free of guilt and experience liberating good sex." (128)

Brewster indicates that he knows this is exactly what he should not have read. He says the stories led to "an almost unnatural state of desire and lust" (128).

A final element of Impossible Vacation, which suggests the complicated Oedipal relationship of Brewster and his mother, while also suggesting the specific connection to the Narcissus myth, occurs during a session Brewster has with a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist has told Brewster that he is in the manic mode of a manic-depressive state, and that a depressive episode will follow. Brewster reveals to the reader, in the voice of the narrator, that he has thought, "I was in fact afraid, deep-down afraid, that I had inherited Mom's illness, that it had been there all the time and now it was surfacing at last" (162). The choice of the word "surfacing" is effective in evoking an image of a reflection appearing on the surface of a pool. In fact, Brewster fears that he is so connected to his mother, even beyond an Oedipal attraction, that her image surfaces as his own.

Throughout Impossible Vacation, numerous passages suggest connections to myth and ritual, revealing a strong sense of Brewster's life experiences as an epic journey, relating his quest for the self to the universal experiences of all people. For example, the importance of ritual itself is established in Brewster's life, early in his relationship with Meg. Brewster says, "Our night rituals were clear and set. Everything felt in control" (63). Brewster also recalls mythic references from
traditions other than ancient Greek (though Greek mythology is most prevalent.) For instance, Brewster describes the moments after his father told him of his mother's death this way:

I just sat there and didn't reach out to Dad or say a word. I just sat there with the phrase going over and over in my head. 'She's gone.' She's gone. And over and over that phrase continued, like the end of a story in a Grimm fairy tale, like when the princess or the queen dies of a broken heart. And it played over and over again, that phrase 'She's gone.' She's gone--died of a broken heart. She's gone. She's gone. She died of a broken heart. (57-58)

The repetition of phrases, the reference to fairy tales, and the connections to the universal experience of sorrow are all used here to reinforce the image of myth and legend. He says, "I craved to be this little ubiquitous god . . . an endless sensuous, conscious wind that blew here and there and everywhere" (131).

Brewster North also makes reference to mythic elements in casual ways (referring to an attractive couple as "a blond goddess and a blond god," for example) but the effect is far from casual (55). In fact, if anything, the reference to mythology is strengthened because it is so subtle: it is the essence of Brewster's thinking and experience. He has informed the reader:

So if there was any propensity on my part to take up the path of Zen, it was that steady-as-she-goes quality of Grampa Benton's--coupled with a very beautiful book that had come to me by chance. The book was called Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind. It was utterly without pretense or style. If it had any style at all it was that of a very insightful ten-year-old talking. Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind read the way Grampa Benton sailed The Stout Fellow: beautifully, directly, without complication or unnecessary excitement. It cried out to me to let go of all the manufactured drama in my life, all the hype that I felt I had to make in order to feel I was living, really living. I wanted to be done with that once and for all. Zen was about concentrating on everyday routines, becoming calm and ordinary, making everyday life into a state of present enlightenment. (76)
As Brewster seeks a way to be, as he puts it, "really living," he is in essence in search of a self, an identity he believes to be authentic and genuine. The emphasis on the importance of establishing "everyday routines" in the passage above further illustrates his desire for ritual as a comforting route to security.

Throughout the novel, phrases and images reinforce again and again the suggestion of water as a source of rejuvenation and relief, as the pool provides initial replenishment for Narcissus. Examples include Brewster's references to Virginia Woolf and Hart Crane, who "merged" with a figurative pool to find release, by "walking into a river" and "walk(ing) off the stern of his cruise ship in the Gulf of Mexico," respectively (29). Brewster himself seeks water, compelled by its power to provide some type of relief. He says, "Knew a beautiful place to go: it was a stream . . . . If we could just get to the beginning of that stream, I thought, everything would be fine" (38). And, "... I was happy to know what I did want, and that was water. We went to the water" (39). Many other water-as-rejuvenator or water-as-source-of-help images occur, but most significant is the concept of water as a compelling, ruling force. A striking example of this appears during Brewster's symbolic journey down into the Grand Canyon: "At the time I had no idea that I would have to go through so much stupid confusion before I'd even begin to get to the other side; and in all this confusion, water, without my knowing it, was really the ruling force." (122) For Brewster, whose mother so longed for the ocean, and descended into madness taken from it the compelling force of water as potential provider of happiness is as powerful as it is for Narcissus, who is unable to leave the pool.
Numerous instances of mirror images and doubles also appear in *Impossible Vacation*, all representative of figurative pools by virtue of their use as reflecting surfaces. More than simply providing reflections, they provide a particular type of reflection, always indicating some aspect of revealing the self. For example, Brewster uses specific words such as "mirrored" and "reflection" to suggest images of self-knowledge (73). Eyes also are used symbolically as figurative mirrors (55, 89, 177, 178). An image directly related to eyes, sight, is used strategically to suggest powerfully that "vision" is indeed a metaphor for "understanding":

> Things were definitely not going well, and I think the only reason I didn't try to kill myself was that I simply was not awake long enough to do it. I also knew somewhere in the back of my addled, panicked mind, that I was very lucky to have Meg as a nurse, and that she cared for me deeply and was watching over me as I slept. It was in her eyes that I continued to exist. (178)

Without a reflection, there is no evidence of a self, no secure sense of identity.

Memory, another figurative type of reflective pool, is also employed as a symbolic reflection. An example appears in Brewster's recounting of his experiences in the Zendo, an example which also recalls the inability of Narcissus to move away from the pool:

> Then around the third day of sitting, things began to get more than a little claustrophobic. I was stuck in my past. Memory felt like a substance now. Memory felt like the only thing that was real. I was trapped with myself and wanted desperately to get out, but had no idea what there was outside of myself. Memories of my past played over and over again. Memories flowed into horrors of hindsight and regret, thoughts of how I would do things differently if only I could relive them, if only I could come back with the knowledge that I had now. (81)
Brewster is every bit as trapped as is Narcissus, and even more significantly, they are both trapped by their reflections. Brewster, "stuck in [his] past," is Narcissus, "stuck" in his present.

In Impossible Vacation, Brewster North places enormous significance on reflections, as evidenced by the extreme number of reference to types of mirrors, and eyes used figuratively as symbolic mirrors. An important example is found within Brewster's description of his visit with the Bhagwan, whom he describes as

... the perfect guru. He was like Kennedy, the perfect president. He had the charisma. He had the aura. He had the look. He was a tall man with a balding head, long hair on the sides, and a flowing white beard. His face was open and expressive, but his eyes were the thing. I had never seen eyes like them. His eyes were anything and everything you wanted to read into them. (102)

The eyes of the Bhagwan reflect back an idealized image. They seem to be perceived by Brewster as capable of revealing truth, and Brewster is drawn to them in the same way Narcissus is drawn to the pool. Underneath the surface of the water, Narcissus sees an image which reflects adoration and which gazes back at him with the same untiring devotion. But the elusive boy cannot be possessed; he is out of reach.

Similarly, a secure self-image seems equally unattainable for Brewster.

Photographs, film, and camera lenses also appear in Impossible Vacation in ways which suggest they are actually symbols of reflecting pools as well. Brewster says of the photographs Meg takes of him that they are unsettling: "... I didn’t like the face I saw... . When I saw those photos I saw the truth of something I couldn’t face. I couldn’t face my face, and that’s when the rolling and groaning began again.
All that crazy indecision began again."

(159) Brewster has realized that the way he perceives himself, the self-image he has is determined by how he thinks he looks. In other words, his image is his reflection.

This dilemma, the conflicting images of the self, is reinforced when Brewster discovers he may be given an opportunity to appear in a film. For Brewster, it is as though he does not believe he has a self unless he can see it reflected in the "pool" of being on-camera. He says, "At last I was going to be on camera. At last, for a moment at least, my life was going to mean something" (166). When Brewster, during the actual filming, delivers his lines in a way which makes the cast and crew laugh, he is pleased with the reflection of the self which he sees in their responses: "I felt like I'd accomplished something, like I was potent. I had brought a little more laughter into the world, and I liked the feeling of that" (168). Apparently, the experience of making the film has bolstered Brewster's sense of self; he likes what he sees reflected back to him.

The gaze, as used to signify the symbolic reference to the relationship of Narcissus to his reflection, is important in Impossible Vacation, in several respects. As with the symbolic use of the metaphor of photography, Brewster's identity seems to be shaped by the reactions he observes in the eyes of others. Brewster seems to be validated in his sense of self by the attention of others, particularly their gaze. He says, "Being looked at made me feel alive and present: alive in proportion to the number of eyes that were gazing at me. My whole body was tingling as those eye beams reified it" (134). Interestingly, this particular instance refers to Brewster's
being gazed at by the men in the gay bath. He says, "I had arrived in the eyes of all these men" (134). He finds that he is fascinated with the thought of being desirable, and that he enjoys indicating that there may be possible returned interest on his part. This time, it is Brewster who is the elusive boy, pursued by others.

Brewster also indicates that the gaze of others is an important determining factor of his self concept. It is as though he only truly exists within the gaze of others. He says "the more people looked at me, the more I was present" (44). As he describes his experience of live modelling for the art classes, he seems to recognize how much he depends on the gaze of others to signify to himself that he exists. He continues, "I would feel my whole body fill up with substance again in their eyes. . . . It was about being alone and not being alone all at the same time. But most of all it was about my body being consumed by those eyes" (45). As in the myth of Narcissus, the gaze is highly charged with sexual energy, for the sustained attention of others is at once both affirming and erotic. 21

The suggestion of an attraction to an androgynous image, or to a homosexual image, appears in Impossible Vacation as it has in other works by Gray. One clear example is found in Brewster's description of his friendship with Rex, the theatre

21In an interview, Spalding Gray responded to my question concerning his rumored preference for having the house lights up during his performances by saying that he insists that they indeed, be on during the monologues. He says he needs to be able to see the faces of the audiences, and he often remarks, during conversation, about visible reactions he sees in audience members' faces. He has also discussed the moment he fell in love with Renee Shafransky, literally at first sight. (She had come to see him perform, and he describes his immediate attraction to her when her face "lit up" when their eyes met. Both examples indicate the deep significance which visible reactions, responses and feedback have to Gray as a writer and performer.
director of *The Tower.* Brewster says, "Rex and I hit it off. I would almost say we bonded, which was rare for me because I had so few male friends. I was never attracted to real male men. But Rex had a nice blend of male and female in him and I was attracted to that quality (68)."

Later in the novel, this issue becomes more overt, as Brewster struggles to establish, once and for all, a cohesive, integrated self. This struggle culminates in the graphically portrayed anonymous sexual encounter in the gay bath in Amsterdam, an experience which leaves Brewster feeling rejected and disappointed. For Brewster, the search for (and the struggle to possess) the elusive boy continues, ending in desertion and abandonment.

Eventually, Brewster realizes the self is not merely what he sees reflected by others. While he has struggled to keep track of a self by comparing himself to the image of others (he knows who he is at the ashram, for example, by being "the only one not dressed in orange") he begins to perceive the self as autonomous (101). This self-determination is, at first, claustrophobic to Brewster: "I was suffering from scopophilia: I was caught in my eyes, looking and looking, looking at all these happy people everywhere, and I was getting very lonely because I knew that I was not one of them." (120)

Eventually, Brewster is able to redefine the self, and finds that a determination to be independent allows a sense of freedom, rather than restricting, claustrophobic anxiety. As he interviews for film work, he reinvents a self, saying 'So I just started making up a history, and the more I did that the better I felt. My whole body took
on a kind of confident, cocky attitude" (165). As Brewster and Meg develop their production of Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*, he describes the end product as "a hodgepodge of mixed emotion, straightforward acting, and a lot of direct autobiographical address" (183). Apparently, he has come to be more comfortable with the idea of inventing a persona (based on autobiographical events yet to some degree fictionalized.) In the earlier reference above, he indicates that he believes he has misrepresented himself with an intent to deceive, whereas the second reference reveals an understanding of the self as performed image.

It is this, prevailing cultural atmosphere, this idea that we are the images we create, which Brewster North embodies in *Impossible Vacation*. A child of the turbulent sixties, he epitomizes the struggle both to fit in and be an individual, and his developing mode of performance reflects as well the culture's growing interest in the self. Christopher Lasch, however, has warned us that we are not our images. In his description of the culture as narcissistic, he implies his criticism of our society as being too interested in the self. In *The Minimal Self*, Lasch argues, however, with Daniel Yankelovich (who had defined narcissism as "selfishness of an extreme form") by asserting, "Narcissism signifies a loss of selfhood, not self assertion. It refers to a self threatened with disintegration and by a sense of inner emptiness. To avoid confusion, what I have called the culture of narcissism might better be characterized, at least for the moment, as a culture of survivalism" (57). Analyzed in this light, it seems more that Brewster is perpetually terrified that there is no self, rather than indulgently boasting about the self as ideal.

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Brewster definitely does seek the ideal throughout Impossible Vacation, and the "elusive boy" can be viewed as a metaphor for the object of his search. As Narcissus ignores Echo, seeking instead the possession of the elusive boy who remains just out of reach under the water's surface, Brewster seeks an ideal boy as well. It is not Shanti, however, whom Brewster really desires, though Shanti does serve as a symbolic reference. The elusive boy is Brewster himself, the innocent beautiful child, freed from the prison of the pool. The suicide of Brewster's mother, the troubled family relationships, the difficulties of the relationship with Meg, the experimentation with homosexuality and the emotional breakdown he suffers have all been at times symbolized by the entrapment at the pool. The boy seems to remain elusive.

Impossible Vacation ends with a journey deep into the earth, as Brewster walks down into the Grand Canyon. As he descends into "Mother Earth at last," he comes upon a stream, "crystal clear, a rushing transparency" (226). He slips into the stream and is immediately shocked by its coldness, so cold that it "made all parts of me come together and immediately be there . . . Then some other part of me, a part that could clearly see how the man and the child were united in that complex of flesh, felt reconciliation" (227). The water, which is here again, as it is always in Impossible Vacation, a source of rejuvenation, becomes the source of Brewster's realization that he and the boy are integrated, the elusive boy is at last in his possession. Brewster says he was "washed clean by the stream . . . emptied of past and future, and everything came together in the present." In fact, the novel returns to
the opening passage, completing a cyclical narrative. Brewster says, as he drives home from the Canyon, "I half dreamed and half remembered Mom's never-ending passion for the sea" (228). The elusive boy has come home.
CHAPTER 5

WHAT YOU SEEK IS NOWHERE . . . THE VISION ONLY SHADOW

In writing about his own life as the basis of his monologues and the novel Impossible Vacation, Spalding Gray has voiced a concern that his work is vain or self-indulgent. In Monster in a Box, Gray discusses the difficulties associated with writing an autobiographical novel, especially one which addresses such personal dilemmas as libido and the struggle to define the self:

All of a sudden I think, Oh my God, how--with the world coming to an end, people starving, the ozone layer ripping, and the tropical rain forests disappearing at a football field a second--how can I be writing this solipsistic, narcissistic, self-indulgent pile of poop? I mean, the best thing I could do is take it up to the Brooklyn Bridge and toss it off at dawn. (63)

Here, Gray uses the term "narcissistic" in its common usage sense of conceited self-absorption. However, narcissism as described in Freud's classic essay, On Narcissism: An Introduction, refers to a much more complex psychological pattern of behavior.

Freud's essay describes narcissism as "the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated--who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete
satisfaction through these activities." (17) Freud describes this condition, as symptomatic of a disorder when the individual experiences compulsive behavior.

Spalding Gray's persona, while dealing specifically with issues of the development of a self identity, can be said to explore narcissistic dilemmas (with which the current culture can certainly identify) without being reduced to such simplistic terms as to label him a narcissist. Rather, he frankly deals with such subjects as the search for sexual identity, the libido as an aspect of self, and relationships with others. That he does so within the context of a culture which places the self as an object of obsessive desire reinforces the resonances to Narcissus myth imagery in a particular way. Gray's Anatomy, which toured the United States in 1994 and 1995, addresses a specific struggle of the self, based on Gray's own experiences as he approached the age of 50.

Gray, in all of his monologues, looks deeply into the pool in order to avoid the fatality of being trapped, as was Narcissus, unable to leave the water's edge. Until Gray's Anatomy, however, his onstage persona has been in many ways much more immobilized than he has realized. Though he tells a story of great measures taken ostensibly to preserve his sight, the monologue is really about the exhaustive actions of his onstage persona to avoid "seeing" in a different sense. Avoidance and guilt surface as crucial issues of Gray's Anatomy, and though Echo is finally heard (and responded to) in this monologue, she remains a somewhat peripheral character.

Freud described a paranoid sense of guilt as being related to "a fear of punishment by the parents, or, more correctly, the fear of losing their love" (43).
This is profoundly true for Gray, whose mother was a strongly devout Christian Scientist: the development of a serious health problem at the age of 50 presented a complex series of dilemmas. For Gray, whose adolescence had been steeped in Christian Science teaching that all illness and injury was caused by [moral] "error," turning 50 and confronting the aging process was difficult enough. The fact that he suddenly, and at the same time, developed an eye condition which had the possible effect of blindness was traumatic. *Gray's Anatomy* is about the injury to his left eye (a "macula pucker," which is a result of the liquification of the eye's vitreous humor, or gel) and the extraordinary measures he takes to try to avoid surgery, which, his ophthalmologist admits, may actually cause blindness itself.\(^2\)

For the protagonist of *Gray's Anatomy*, an injury to his eye is also an injury to his "I," for he realizes this is the first in what may be a continuing series of physical degenerations as he begins to age. Says Gray, "All of my monologues are built around various centrifugal forces in my life . . . and the events leading up to my eye operation forced me to look at aging, mortality, and breakdown." (Gray, "Meet Our Newest Interviewer" 3) At first, Gray (with his childhood instruction that error causes illness) believed he must have caused the problem himself:

> First of all, I thought it might be the book--the book that I was writing, *Impossible Vacation*. It was simply too painful. It was about my mother's suicide, and I felt I really had never properly grieved for her, or mourned her, and what happened was, my eye--my left eye just

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\(^2\)The cover of the published edition of *Gray's Anatomy* is especially telling. The photograph of Spalding Gray shows him holding a large magnifying glass, dramatically enlarging, in effect, his left eye. The theme of self-examination, and a disproportionately large eye, or "I," is clear.

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cried, in a big way . . . And then I began to think, no, it was because the book was written in the first person. It was too much I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, i, i, i, i, i, i! (Gray's Anatomy, 10-11)

Interestingly, his New Age friends all responded that the cause was the result of something Gray must "not want to see" (11). Gray writes that he was sure it all must be related to his Oedipus complex, and that he was reading Freud's essay on negation at the time.23 He notes, "Freud says that the denial of some state[s] of affairs is an implicit acknowledgement of it" (11).

Alice Miller reiterates Freud's idea of denial being directly related to acknowledgement of a problem with the self. Miller says that if a child "... is lucky enough to grow up with a mirroring, available mother who is at the child's disposal . . . then a healthy self-feeling can gradually develop in the growing child" (The Drama of the Gifted Child 53). Gray's onstage persona believes he did not have such a mother.24 In regard to her understanding of illness as error, and the sense Gray's character experienced as a child that he could not obtain truly thoughtful responses

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23In Playing and Reality, D.W. Winnicott writes that conflicting dilemmas often surface as health-related problems. According to Winnicott, "Health can be looked at in terms of fusion (erotic and destructive drives) and this makes more urgent than ever the examination of the origin of aggression and of destructive fantasy" (70). There is an apparent basis in psychoanalytic theory, then, in Gray's character's observation that his friends believe the eye problem is related to something he does "not want to see." Gray's character makes the connection to the conflicts related to Oedipal dilemmas and his eyesight in a manner very similar to Winnicott's statement above concerning the fusion of erotic and destructive drives.

24For more on the subject of the problems of childhood, especially those related to difficulties in the mirroring of mother-child relationships, see Alice Miller's The Untouched Key and D.W. Winnicott's The Child, the Family and the Outside World. Both of these works approach lack of adequate mirroring as the source of problems in creativity and self-expression.
from her to his questions about illness and death, it is apparent that she was not a "mirroring" mother as portrayed in this monologue.\textsuperscript{25} That work is much more explicit in its exploration of two crucial philosophical questions encountered profoundly during his adolescence: libido and death. These two subjects of awareness are universally troubling concepts for the individual that do lead to a "... healthy self-feeling ... and unquestioned certainty that the feelings and needs one experiences are part of one's self" (Miller 53).

In Gray's Anatomy, because the surgeon cannot guarantee that the recommended "macula scraping" will correct the problem, and that it may in fact actually cause blindness, Gray embarks on an epic journey of alternative treatments ranging from an Indian sweat lodge in Minneapolis to a dictatorial nutrition specialist in Poughkeepsie, to a psychic surgeon in the Philippines. In the end, he has the recommended surgery in New York anyway. Throughout, the myth of Narcissus resonates in images of water (particularly in regard to reflections) and sight as a metaphor for the gaze of the self and the object.

Gray does everything he can to avoid facing up to the recommended surgery. With echoes of his mother's admonitions to avoid doctors and medicine (because that itself would be error: a showing of lack of faith in the healing power of God alone) ringing in his head, Gray decides to pursue spiritual healing. He refers often, in all of his monologues, to his chronic sense of guilt, but in Gray's Anatomy, he

\textsuperscript{25} Gray had mentioned this aspect of his self-development in the work at hand, Gray's Anatomy, but explores the subject in much greater detail in his earlier Sex and Death to the Age 14.
specifically mentions that the eye problem (the "I" problem) arose while working on his strongly autobiographical novel, *Impossible Vacation*, in which he deals with his mother's descent into madness and eventual suicide. Clearly, the writing of *Impossible Vacation* awakens long-repressed memories of past guilt (he agonizes over not having been able to help her) and present guilt (he feels as though his inadequacies have caused the problem with his eye to develop).

Alice Miller, in her discussions of the true self in *Drama of The Gifted Child* writes that this is a common difficulty.26 It is as though she is writing of Spalding Gray personally when she writes:

> The confrontation with our own reality will help us give up the illusions that disguise our past . . . . This will make us free to resolve the old, unconscious and unjustified feelings of guilt stemming from our childhood . . . . If we don’t allow ourselves to recognize our wrongdoings in the present and take steps to correct them, we will not be able to resolve our unreal guilt feelings from the past. (41)

In the monologue, Gray's persona is unable to recognize and resolve past conflicts and guilt and so decides to pursue non-surgical, non-traditional methods of treatment. He seems to know instinctively that spiritual treatment may be the best method of treating an "I" problem. Azaria, the woman he met in a monologue workshop who

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26 For more on the use of the term "true self" as it applies to a study of narcissistic issues, see Alexander Lowen, *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self*. Lowen describes a true self as an individual who has been able to integrate what he calls the "true values of the self--namely, self-expression, self-possession, dignity, and integrity" (ix). He also suggests that an "integrated" personality is able to balance successfully the dichotomy between a public persona and a private sense of self.
leads the Indian sweat lodge in his first "alternative therapy," tells him she is able to separate her astral body from her corporal body in a dreamlike state. He asks her:

My God, you mean a part of you can get up and look back at your body? She said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Didn't you ever consider making love to yourself?' Because, I mean, that's the first thing I would want to do if I found myself leaving my body. (24)

Like Narcissus, Gray’s persona reveals a strong sexual attraction to his reflected "other" self.

When Gray tries "palming," a technique of rubbing the eyes with one’s palms, developed by a self-help writer in California, Sebastian Sherborne, he must cover his eyes for three to four hours after intensely rubbing them 300-400 times. He describes it as "... unbearable. It is unbearable being stuck in all that darkness" (33). He writes that everywhere he goes, people see him covering his eyes and so believe he is in perpetual despair. The palming becomes a compulsion, which leads to intense self-analysis. The situation is very similar to Narcissus being "stuck" at the pool:

The more I look inside, the more I don’t see a self to heal .... There’s no core, no me. All I see is darkness, which is more and more frightening for me. It feels just like death .... I gradually came to realize that Sebastian Sherborne was an egocentric, self-absorbed man. He was really too much like myself for me to be open with him. (34)

It is as though Narcissus, for a moment, realizes it is his own image he sees reflected in the pool. Gray’s persona senses what he has not known before, but the recognition is fleeting; he cannot quite see it before it is gone. Kohut describes this type of intense self-realization as being "... motivated by [one’s] desire to escape from the
discomfort caused by the intrusion of the narcissistic-exhibitionistic libido into the ego [resulting in] a mood of uneasy elation alternating . . . with painful self-consciousness, shame, tension, and hypochondria (190-191).

If Kohut is correct, we could then predict that Gray's character's next action would probably be to try to escape reality by taking another avoidance step, with an increase in the manifestation of problematic physical symptoms. This is precisely what occurs: Gray decides to discontinue the palming, and his longtime girlfriend, director Renee Shafransky, suggests that they should marry. He responds that he likes being "boyfriend" and "girlfriend" because it makes him feel younger, but when she continues to pursue the subject of marriage, he says:

The ceremony for instance. 'Till death do us part.' I don't want to be in a ceremony where they talk about death. Or 'for as long as they two shall live.' It's so depress--actually . . . it's my eye, come to think of it. Till I get this eye thing cleared up, I would rather not, you know . . . . I can't do both . . . . As soon as the eye is dealt with, I will discuss it in an adult way. (38-39)

Clearly, Gray's persona says, in effect, "I am distracted from you by my eye . . . you are peripheral." In the monologue, Renee is Echo to Spalding's Narcissus.

Additional insight into his onstage persona's avoidance of the realization of the true self can be gained by again replacing the word "eye" with "I" in the above passage. It would then read: "Till I get this 'I' thing cleared up, I would rather not, you know . . . . I can't do both . . . as soon as the 'I' is dealt with, I will discuss it in an adult way." The problem of self-identity is not yet settled.
In another attempt to try to solve the problem in some kind of active, adult way, Gray also tries a nutrition specialist he hears of on a radio talk show. When he calls the telephone number provided on the broadcast for information, the "old, ancient androgynous voice" who answers is likened by Gray to Tiresias (40). It is important that Gray uses this particular metaphor: not only is Tiresias the seer of the Narcissus myth, he is also blind. In the myth, Tiresias is able to see things others cannot; though he is physically blind, he possesses a psychic kind of sight. Gray's metaphor indicates that he is hoping the nutrition specialist will also be able to see something Gray cannot, and help Gray heal his eye (his "I"). When Gray arrives at the home offices of Dr. Ron B. and Dr. Don B. Axe, the nutritionist and his brother, he is startled to find that they are both nearly blind themselves and wear extremely thick glasses. The house itself is built with multi-colored stones, and the office is filled with displays of ski medals, miniature dinosaurs, the mounted head of a tiger, maps of the moon framed in pink Hula-Hoops, and more. Gray says: "I'm looking everywhere like a little baby trying to take it all in." And Don Axe is saying, "All of this stuff makes you want to see, doesn't it?" (41-42) Literally, but more importantly, figuratively, Gray desperately wants to see. Gray's onstage persona struggles to continue the gaze, just as compelled as Narcissus is to his own reflection.

The monologue is filled with references to not being ready to see. When friends tell him of a Filipino psychic surgeon, he replies that he's "not ready to see the doctor," and so goes off to the Philippines (60). When he gets there, however, he says, "But what I was about to see--I was completely unprepared for. I couldn't
believe my eyes" (63). The entire world of the psychic surgeon, with its game-show quality of lurid entertainment, though daunting, does not prove too much for Gray's persona. He allows the "surgeon," Pini Lopa, to "operate" on him. His description of the procedure clearly recalls the rape imagery of the Narcissus myth: "He is pushing in to either side of my eye, and at that moment, I really felt like my eye is a vagina and his two fingers are erect bloody penises coming at me. I'm having a shutdown virgin response here." (69)

Gray says that blood gushes, seemingly, out of his eye, and that he rushes to the men's room to look at his eye, and he finds that there is "no leftover blood, and the eye's not any better" (69). The blurriness of vision still remains. Gray experiences extreme confusion wondering why this didn't work, and hearing in his memory the voices of childhood friends from long ago asking, "If you went to this guy who started pulling meatballs out of you the size of melons, would you go to a doctor then?" (69). His response is an emphatic "Yes!"

When Gray then goes ahead with the surgery, Renee manages to get his attention about marriage when she says: "You know when you were in the hospital, every time I tried to get access to you, they wouldn't let me see you, because I was the girlfriend. Now you're going to get older, and you're going to get sicker a lot more and you'll be in the hospital again. I think it's time we got married (74)." He replies that she's right, he listens to Echo, but he also questions the decision. He begins to look at other women: "I'd say to myself, Why not her? . . . In order to diffuse that, I would just cover my right eye and they'd all blur. Men and women would be equal blurs." (75)
Gray's imagery here of creating blurred images which become essentially androgynous creates an interesting sub-text which is suggestive of the sexually ambiguous image reflected in the pool, whom Narcissus loves. It also connects to Freud's description of narcissistic longing as having distinctly homosexual reverberations.

Reminiscent of Narcissus going to the pool to seek knowledge of the loved image, Gray seeks an environment of water. When Gray's protagonist decides to turn from the images he sees and is tempted to follow, he chooses Renee, and asks her to marry him. The day before the wedding, Gray goes to the beach to swim and ponder the changes in his life that marriage will bring.

Unaware that he is caught in a type of undertow, Gray is carried out far from the beach and he nearly drowns. The water image is significant here: Gray is figuratively drowning in his fear of marriage. The event brings about an epiphany: he realizes he's getting married, he's going bald, he's getting old, he's going blind, he's going to die someday, and he desperately calls for help. He recognizes himself clearly in the water, which forces a confrontation with his true self. In despair, he consults an attorney friend and tells him he has cold feet and cannot go through with

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27The term "true self" is used here to indicate the self as an integrated personality, much the same as the definition of Kohut's "cohesive self." For a work which treats the subject of adult confrontation of mature problems of identity (like acceptance of one's eventual aging, health problems, conflicts related to marriage or other long-term relationships, and parenting) see Alexander Lowen, Narcissism: Denial of the True Self. Lowen calls the ability of an individual to reconcile the conflicting urges of the self (at various ages throughout one's past) or in terms of the roles one plays at one time, such as, in Spalding Gray's onstage persona's experience here, of boyfriend, aging man, man with health concerns related to aging, groom-to-be, self-reflexive performer and writer, man who wants to be married, man who fears marriage.
the wedding. His friend replies, "Spalding. You're an actor. Act like you want to get married. See what it feels like, c'mon. Be a mensch," (79). Essentially, he tells Gray to become an image of a man who wants to be married, and merge with that image.

Gray's onstage persona is wrestling with the concept of marriage as a reminder that adulthood is associated with responsibility and commitment. For a character who has struggled so profoundly with the narcissistic dilemmas of fear of aging (and of death) and the attraction to youthfulness and the ideal, the idea of marriage is stifling rather than enticing. Jesse Bryant Wilder has written of Gray's Anatomy that:

Ultimately, what Gray wants to see in a bucket is not simply his liquefied vitreous humor, but the aging process itself. The eye ailment, he says, is a serious problem 'in the sense that it's deeply psychological. It's the first kind of thing that reminded me I was 50 years old . . . that some of my parts were growing old.' (10)

But the eye problem (the crisis of his "I") is also something that enables him to hear the voice of Echo. In that sense, Gray's persona is unlike Narcissus. While Narcissus never really hears, much less responds to Echo, Gray's character turns away from the pool, toward Renee. He is thus more able to create his own potential for action rather than merely reflecting a perpetual, non-progressing present. Gray (who performs all of his monologues seated at a desk with a glass of water) says: "I'm most present when I'm sitting at the table. Telling a story about what happened during the day is more real than the day because I ['eye'] create it. The day was created by someone else" (10).
At that point, Gray's onstage character is able to turn away from the pool, avoiding the "stuckness" of the narcissist, and move toward a new reality (possibly that of the next monologue performance piece). This time, he's bringing Echo with him, but how much of an effect she will have on Gray's character's sense of identity is uncertain. Gray's protagonist, as a narcissist, may have a difficult time integrating another self, in this case a wife, into his life and his concept of self.

This difficulty in loving others is characteristic of one who struggles with narcissistic issues, described by Alice Miller as incapable of experiencing true love for others due to a "passion for [a] false self," like the elusive boy of the Narcissus myth (86). Because Narcissus denied his true self (only looking at the beautiful reflected image from the front, ignoring the back or side) the loved image was really an idealized, romanticized reflection. In the same way, Spalding Gray's onstage character in *Grav's Anatomy* may be unable truly to commit to the character of Renee, because his own obsession with overcoming his "I" problem blocks his ability to see beyond his own reflection. Miller writes that this "deadening" of ourselves to the real world can be overcome through therapy, and that these feelings, when understood, can "open the door to the inner world which is much richer than the [merely] beautiful countenance" (86).

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28Renee Shafransky has collaborated with Spalding Gray on numerous projects, as an editor and a director. Their work together includes the final editing of Gray's strongly autobiographical novel *Impossible Vacation* and the final manuscript for the monologue *Grav's Anatomy*. The character of Meg in *Impossible Vacation* parallels Spalding Gray's earlier relationship with Elizabeth LeCompte. In both works the stories of the romantic and sexual relationships are important, but only as they are part of the issues of a search for a personal identity, avoidance and guilt.
Ironically, people wrestling with narcissistic dilemmas are often characterized by psychoanalysts as among the most difficult to work with in therapy. This is due largely to their persistence in wanting to continue seeing their own reflections. Rollo May attributes this to the inability of one struggling with narcissistic issues to establish "any deep relationship with the therapist" (113). Because of this, individuals with the narcissistic personality disorder, for example, tend to remain isolated, deeply lonely individuals who sometimes remain in therapy for many years, since they regard the therapist as a sounding-board for advice for moral decisions as they occur, rather than seeking a life-changing breakthrough. Like the Narcissus in the myth, they tend to prefer the isolation of the pool because it is, at least, familiar and comfortable, with a devoted image in view.

This description seems to fit Gray’s onstage persona who struggles, in this and other monologues, with his inability to overcome with finality the sense of guilt he has always felt in relation to the suicide of his mother. Unable to help her stay connected to the real world when she experienced episodes of severe depression and incoherence, he was also powerless to prevent her suicide, which happened as he was travelling in Mexico.

Kohut writes extensively of the powerful ramifications of feelings of guilt for those who struggle with narcissistic dilemmas. The most prevalent "tensions" which occur, especially during therapy or in a private, intense "search for the self" are hypochondria, self-consciousness and shame (Kohut 213). *Gray’s Anatomy* would then seem to be a case study exhibiting all three tensions: Gray’s persona’s
obsession with his eye problem, an intense soul-searching regarding his relationship with Renee, and the pervasive sense of guilt about his mother's suicide.

It is significant that Gray concludes the monologue with his onstage protagonist’s marriage to Renee’s character, for it indicates that he considers the marriage to be an act of closure for his character. Freud wrote that many individuals typically attempt to return to a narcissistic position after undergoing intense "expenditure of libido upon [self] objects, by choosing a sexual ideal . . . . This is the cure by love, which he generally prefers to cure by analysis" (42-43). Freud, in this sense, would describe the marriage to Renee’s character not as a step away from narcissistic self-love, but rather a return, since the other (Renee) reflects back love and dedication. To Freud, Renee would simply be another form of reflected image, but to Gray’s protagonist, it may be that she is perceived instead as a separate individual. At the conclusion of Gray’s Anatomy, Gray’s persona apparently considers both his eye problem (the physical ailment) and his I problem (finding love and a life with Renee) to be resolved. The opening page of the monologue quotes the biblical passage John 24:25:

It happened that one of the twelve, Thomas, was absent when Jesus came. The other disciples kept telling him: ‘We have seen the Lord!’ His answer was, ‘I will never believe it without probing the nailprints in his hands, without putting my finger in the nailmark and my hand into his side.’

By choosing this passage with which to open the monologue, Gray’s onstage character seems to be saying: Seeing is believing! My eye is fixed. I married Renee. Things are better.
Gray’s Anatomy seems to be a culmination of a number of issues introduced much earlier, in Gray’s monologue Sex and Death to the Age 14 (published in a collection by Random House in 1986.) Gray writes that he had returned to The Performing Garage in 1979 and began working in the monologic form for the first time. The result was Sex and Death to the Age 14, which began the first person narrative form of an autobiography-based monologue involving the persona named Spalding Gray, played and written by Spalding Gray.

In addition to the examination of the personal struggles of an adolescent attempting to establish a self, separated from his parents (and especially from his mother) Sex and Death to the Age 14 refers back to Narcissus myth imagery. The idea of a reflection as a metaphor for an object of obsessive desire is a strong presence in this monologue, which deals with Gray’s onstage character as he enters adolescence. Family rituals are important in Sex and Death to the age 14, especially as they concern the acquiring of family pets (and their subsequent burials as they are hit by cars, poisoned or otherwise killed.) Gray’s character confronts the troubling concept of death and he must come to terms with the realization that death is an eventuality for all living things. This dilemma is again consistent with the pattern of all of Gray’s monologues (and his novel, Impossible Vacation) which came after. In addition, the issue of acceptance of the inevitability of death relates closely to other narcissistic issues: fear of aging, the obsessive attraction to youthfulness, the terror of the loss of self.
Gray's persona tells of his fascination with the combined obsessions of the self and his awakening sexuality in terms reminiscent of the sexual attraction of Narcissus to the self, though Narcissus does not recognize it as such. Images of mirrors, reflections, and masturbation rituals appear in conjunction with water imagery in ways which again, as in the other narratives, suggest a connection to the Narcissus myth. For example, the onstage persona (Gray as an adolescent) tells us:

There was a big mansion across the street from our house that the president of Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric owned, and I would run around in his backyard, naked under a full moon, swinging from pine trees like a monkey, over marble statues of women in the nude. That was one of the excitements. The other was mirrors. (24)

More specifically, the issue of Gray's onstage persona as he develops an awareness of young girls, and later a sexual attraction to the teenage girls of his neighborhood, provides a link to the attraction of Narcissus to other wood nymphs of the forest. Narcissus was happily beloved, and Ovid tells us that "many a youth and many a girl desired him" (Melville 61).

It is as though the experiences of Gray's onstage persona continue in much the same way. As Narcissus frolics in the woods until he becomes obsessed by the reflected image in the pool, Gray's persona continues the life begun here in Sex and Death to the Age 14 to the point of Gray's Anatomy. For Gray's character, the prospect of marriage at the age of 50 (presenting a dilemma for a man symbolically either beginning or ending a life.) From the beginning, as presented in Sex and Death to the Age 14, to the present moment, to the conclusion of Gray's Anatomy, Gray's onstage persona has wrestled consistently with the obsession of possessing the
self. The seemingly happy closure of the conclusion of *Gray's Anatomy* (marriage to Renee) appears to suggest that the self has been realized. By committing his life to Renee, Gray's onstage persona seems to be affirming that the questions of self-identity and self-destination are resolved.

But Rolfe Humphries's translation of Ovid's telling of the Narcissus myth provides foreshadowing which suggests otherwise:

> . . . poor credulous youngster? What you seek is nowhere,
> And if you turn away, you will take with you
> The boy you love. The vision is only shadow,
> Only reflections lacking any substance. (Humphries 3.440-443.)
CHAPTER 6

THE VISION . . . GOES AWAY WITH YOU, IF YOU CAN GO AWAY

The final portion of Ovid's telling of the Narcissus myth refers to the inability of Narcissus to move away from the pool. Indeed Gray's onstage character typically expresses a difficulty in accepting and dealing with the challenges adult life presents. The fear of death and aging, the claustrophobic reactions to commitments, and the hypochondria Gray's onstage persona expresses are all essentially the qualities shared with Narcissus.29

At the point in the story where we find the above quotation, Narcissus has discovered and then denied his reflected image, and has remained obsessed with the desire to "possess" the self (though he seemingly insists it is not the self, but an

29Narcissus must choose to continue looking downward into the pool, or instead to move away from the pool, possibly then forming a new relationship with Echo (or another) or even moving farther away from the water's edge to begin a new existence. In Narcissism and Character Transformation: The Psychology of Narcissistic Character Disorders, Nathan Schwartz-Salant discusses "going deeper into the well through imagination [as it] represents a transition that narcissistic character generally avoids" (96). He writes that "going deeper into the well" represents a "plunge deeper into the unconscious" as a "resolution to the dilemma of Narcissus" (96-7). According to Schwartz-Salant the narcissist is unable to go farther into the unconscious in search of an answer to the problem of identity because of the deep-seated belief "that nothing exists in the inner world." Schwartz-Salant quotes Marsilio Ficino's fifteenth-century interpretation of the myth as a representation of an individual seeking the soul in the reflection. Therefore, Gray's character in It's a Slippery Slope is at a decisive turning point: to continue to look into the self, downward into the well, or outward toward an other.
"other.") At this writing, Spalding Gray is developing his fifteenth monologue, *It's a Slippery Slope*, which is scheduled to premiere at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre in September 1996. In this monologue, which has completed a tour of performances as a "work in progress," Gray’s character reveals that like Narcissus, he still struggles with the dilemmas of commitment, identity and relationships with others. However, he has come to a place where the parallel to Narcissus at the pool ends. *It's a Slippery Slope*’s protagonist is indeed able to move away from the pool. While not abandoning the motives which unify all of Gray’s self-reflexive performance pieces, the work-in-progress explores new ground, maintaining Gray’s protagonist’s role as an Everyman of his times. Just as he has provided a symbolic voice for the angst-ridden baby boomers wrestling with issues of the narcissistic 1970s and 1980s, Gray’s narrator of *It's a Slippery Slope* articulates an eloquent response to the dilemmas presented to everyone at some point: given these choices, how will I live? Who will I be?

As with most of Gray’s monologues, *It's a Slippery Slope* refers directly to previous monologues, providing a type of symbolic mirror. In doing so, Gray has established a metaphoric reminder that all of his monologues deal with "reflection" in several ways. The monologues reflect each other (and the different phases of the life of Gray’s onstage persona) as well as being concerned with reflection as philosophical musings about memories. *It's a Slippery Slope* so directly references many of Gray’s motifs that it can be seen as a culmination of all of his work to date. The work is also the monologue which recalls Narcissus myth imagery the most completely.
The structure of the monologue is more circular than most of Gray's earlier monologues. While Gray always brings the listeners back to an idea previously introduced in a monologue for the conclusion, *It's a Slippery Slope* reinforces a thematic structure more overtly than the others. Gray begins this new monologue with a reference to geometry on several levels: he begins by telling us that he was first drawn to the intriguing triangular shape of mountains framed in the windowpane glass as he looked out during, appropriately enough, geometry class. This is a recurring thought throughout *It's a Slippery Slope*. Gray lyrically describes references to slopes, mountains and even canyons (as "inverted mountains") in ways which emphasize form and structure as comforting and beautiful images. This is a new experience for Gray's protagonist who has, we are told, previously experienced difficulties like paranoia and claustrophobia with anything reminding him of imposed structure (like commitment, for example.) This time, the structure of the monologue utilizes the metaphor of geometry to suggest evenness, completion. *It's a Slippery Slope* leads us back, at the monologue's conclusion, to the opening geometrical motif. We have been brought full circle.

All of Gray's monologues evidence one of his great gifts as a writer, his poetic imagery and quiet philosophical evoking of poignant memory; however, in *It's a Slippery Slope* there is evidence of an increased attention to the painting of images through lyrical choices in wording. When asked about this in an informal interview, Spalding Gray expressed pleasure at hearing that an audience member at the previous evening's performance had commented that the monologue seemed to use very poetic
images. Gray remarked that *It's a Slippery Slope* is indeed his "first conscious effort at incorporating poetry more than [in] any other" monologue, but that beautifully worded images have been important in the other works as well. In fact, Gray said that he has always considered a work finished "when it becomes lyrical." As is his custom, Gray precedes the monologue by communicating to the audience his way of working (he "outlines after [he] has lived a little bit, after reflecting") and here reinforces the idea of the monologue as poetry and as memory. In performing material based on his own experiences, it becomes evident that poetry is indeed important to Gray, for he describes his life and his monologue form as an "open poem, never finished." He describes his work as "memory structured in a narrative," first introducing the subtle concept of a geometric shape to the work in his opening remarks before the monologue officially begins.

Once the monologue begins, with the references to the geometric shapes which intrigue him, attracting him most strongly and inexplicably to mountains, Spalding Gray's onstage persona immediately establishes a connection to the Narcissus myth with its portrayal of one individual as two selves. The quotation selected for the motif of this chapter, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (as translated by Humphries) is particularly apt for this monologue. The "vision" which will "go away with you, if you can go away" reveals a potential for Narcissus to move away from the pool,

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30 Informal interview with Spalding Gray and Diane Conrad Merchant in Columbus, Ohio on March 1, 1996. Spalding Gray performed *It's a Slippery Slope* at the Wexner Center for the Performing Arts on the campus of The Ohio State University from February 28 through March 2, 1996.
taking the reflected self along, if indeed movement away from the pool can be achieved. As the audience will soon come to understand, Gray's protagonist is indeed able to move away from the stuckness of the pool at the monologues' conclusion, taking with him a reflected image of the self. This is revealed, however, to be a most surprising (and moving) development, for in this monologue, the self is truly an other.

It's a Slippery Slope contains four strong associations with the Narcissus myth: a figurative Tiresias in the capacity of blind seer, a symbolic Echo offering continual love and devotion, a narcissus bloom flowering out of both lust and sorrow, and a decisive moment wherein a Narcissus can either stay fixed or move away from the reflecting pool. These elements are so definitive of the Narcissus myth, and so important in this monologue that, It's a Slippery Slope becomes the consummate work of Gray's oeuvre.

In the Narcissus myth, Tiresias appears as the prophet who, though physically blind, has a supernatural ability to figuratively "see" in a philosophical sense. As Ovid tells it:

So blind Tiresias gave to all who came
Faultless and sure reply and far and wide . . .
The lovely sprite bore a fine infant boy,
From birth adorable, and named her son
Narcissus; and of him she asked the seer,
Would he long years and ripe old age enjoy,
Who answered, 'If he shall himself not know.'

(Melville 61.)

In It's a Slippery Slope, Gray the writer utilizes the metaphor of gradually learning and mastering the sport of skiing. In this monologue, Tiresias appears in the form of
an "unconscious teacher," an expert skier who unknowingly teaches the performed character of Spalding Gray to ski intuitively, gaining physical control by relinquishing the urge to control mentally.

In this monologue, the Tiresias figure is symbolically blind by virtue of his being an "unconscious" teacher, and he is just as unable to see physically as the blind prophet of the myth. The man, clad in a yellow slicker and yellow pants, is unable to see due to a whiteout of heavy snow. Gray's persona falls in behind him, and he says of the man (whom he describes as at least "75 years old" and "in great shape") that he is able to be the perfect teacher "because he doesn't know he's teaching me."

Like Tiresias, this figure is somehow able to communicate great lessons unconsciously, particularly about the great questions of life and meaningful existence.31

In ancient Greek mythology, Tiresias appears as a "blind seer," a vehicle for the gods to communicate, through him, prophesies concerning fate and the predicaments of characters. He does not dictate his own directives; rather he

31Schwartz-Salant writes in Narcissism and Character Transformation: The Psychology of Narcissistic Character Disorders (1980) that a common dilemma of individuals in contemporary society is "the issue of meaning and the existence or absence of the guiding power of the self which alone gives a person a sense of direction, and ultimately an awareness of personal identity" (24). He argues that, "[c]ontrary to the view often held, that Narcissus has little to do with the clinical notion of narcissism. . . this is not the case" (25). For more on his interpretation of the connection between the problem of the "guiding power of the self," see his chapters "Narcissism and the Problem of Identity," and "Ovid's Myth of Narcissus," in the work cited above. In these chapters, Schwartz-Salant explores the individual's seeking of a self in terms of a quest for identity, and analyzes that quest as an aspect of both normal and pathological narcissism.
expresses what the gods speak, using Tiresias as a medium of communication. Tiresias is thus an "unconscious teacher," since he reveals what the gods prophesy through him. In a similar manner, the figure of the "unconscious teacher" in Gray's *It's a Slippery Slope*, is able to communicate a great lesson to Gray's character by simply engaging in the action of skiing, "blinded" by the snow. The teacher uses both wisdom and intuitive skill to navigate the slopes, and teaches Gray's protagonist to trust his own intuition while following him.

When Gray's protagonist reaches the bottom of the mountain, having skied with greater ease and skill than ever before, he speaks to his teacher about the lesson he received. They also speak about the extremely low visibility coming down the mountain, and the increased danger of skiing in such a heavy snowfall. Gray's character remarks to him, "I don't know whether I'm having fun or trying to kill myself." The teacher replies, "You know when you're in that place? That's a sign you're alive." Where the ancient Tiresias prophesies that real existence depends, for Narcissus, upon not "knowing" the self, this contemporary Tiresias-figure teaches that knowing (and affirming) one's existence depends upon confronting the potential of death. He says, in effect, that an examined life (knowing whether one is killing oneself or having a good time) results in the ultimate sense of affirmation of self.\(^\text{32}\)

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\(^{32}\)Otto Rank explores the connection between Narcissus myth imagery and death in *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. In the chapter "Narcissism and the Double," Rank points out that the Narcissus myth "by its nature is not alien to the motif of the double, which exhibits meanings of the spirit and of death in folklore material . . . . [In mythology there are] traditions of creation by self-reflection [shown by] the literary treatments which cause the Narcissus theme to appear in the forefront along with the problem of death, be it directly or by pathological distortion" (70).
As in the Narcissus myth, an Echo appears in It's a Slippery Slope, but her appearance this time varies from her previous roles in earlier Gray monologues. This time, the motif of duality of the self is explored within the context of Echo's placement within the narrative. In the Narcissus myth, the concept of a split self (or a dual nature) relates to the character of Narcissus regarding his own (albeit unrecognized) image in the pool. In It's a Slippery Slope, Echo appears as a split character. She figuratively calls, offering love to Narcissus, in the characters of two women in Gray's persona's life: Renee (who also appeared as an Echo figure in the immediately previous monologue Gray's Anatomy) and Kathy (whose presence, it turns out, is also felt in Gray's Anatomy, but known only to Spalding Gray the writer.)

In Ovid's Metamorphoses, Echo falls in love with the beautiful Narcissus, and calls to him. He responds "come this way!" and "Join me here!" but Echo is limited in her responses, having been cursed by Juno, who forces her to repeat only the last phrases of the voices she hears. As Gray's protagonist reveals in It's a Slippery Slope, communication between the two lovers has also been limited in a figurative sense: Gray's onstage character tells the story of the fractured relationship between him and Renee, and reveals the existence of another character, a woman named Kathy, the mother of Gray's protagonist's son. It is as though Gray's onstage character is still looking into the pool, consciously seeking the reflected self, but finding instead the dual reflection of two female images: Renee and Kathy. Gray's onstage character speaks of his past history with Renee Shafransky, his longtime
girlfriend, director and collaborator, as a "fusion," indicating the closeness and identification with an other in a bond so tight "no woman could have broken the fusion I had with Renee."

Nevertheless, Gray's persona is strongly attracted to another woman, Kathy, with whom he has been having an affair even as he proposes to and marries Renee on an oceanside beach, as recounted in Gray's Anatomy.33 When, in September of 1992, Kathy gave birth to Forrest Dylan Gray, the fusion with Renee was broken, but not by the onstage persona of Kathy. Instead, according to Gray's character, the son, the "little innocent Archimedes" pulls Gray's protagonist away from Renee as Echo.34 Gray's onstage persona describes his first glimpse of the infant at eight months of age in a manner which immediately establishes the child as a clear symbol for a reflected image of the self: Gray says, "I saw the back of my father's head, in his head. No blood tests were needed." The reference clearly communicates Gray's persona's sense of identification with the child as an other and, at the same time, an aspect of the self.

33 The site of the wedding to Renee, next to water, is especially significant as a figurative pool. Gray discusses the marriage in both Gray's Anatomy and It's a Slippery Slope in terms of going through with the wedding as a way of affirming life, a metaphoric search for the self as an other.

34 According to Spalding Gray, he uses the image of Archimedes, the inventor of the fulcrum, as a reference to Forrest's ability to break the fusion between his onstage persona and the character of Renee. In a telephone interview on July 1, 1996, Gray stated that the "leverage" exerted by the "unexpected Archimedes" of Forrest illustrates the power the character of the son unconsciously exerts to break the bond "in a way no other woman ever could."
The dilemma Gray's character experiences is complex: he is faced with having to choose between reflected images of Renee, Kathy (and with her, the image of the self as reflected in his son, whom he describes as a "distant mirror.") Reinforcing the parallel of the monologue to Narcissus myth imagery is Gray's metaphor of his son as a "little lust flower," which recalls the appearance of the flowering narcissus as an end result of the sexual longing of Narcissus and the tears shed by the side of the pool by him and by Echo and Narcissus. Gray's protagonist also tells us that he sees the infant as "a complete, whole person," revealing that he is aware of Forrest as an other at the same time he is aware of him as a mirror image of himself. Gray's character articulates very clearly the narcissistic dilemma with which he is presented, as we all are when we consider our lives vs. our deaths. He says he "experienced a perfect paradox" at the moment he first saw his son: the thought occurs to him "now I can die, and I can't die. I have to live, to help this guy through." The struggle with the narcissistic issues of fear of aging and encroaching death is resolved: Gray's persona answers the question with which he has been wrestling since his first monologue. The question of whether the pull toward life is stronger than the fear of death and aging, has been resolved in a way which affirms life. Figuratively, Narcissus has in one sense begun a move away from the pool which reflects his own idealized image.

Gray's persona in It's a Slippery slope tells us that when his son was born, "Renee cried, Kathy cried, I cried, Forrest cried, each in a different way." Like the narcissus blossom, the "lust flower" of Forrest is a child resulting from both sexual longing and sorrow.
In another sense, however, Gray's performed persona remains transfixed at the water's edge, still attracted by a reflection which is an aspect (and a perhaps idealized one) of the self. With his son placed as a reflection of his own image, the infant is indeed symbolic of Gray's reflected image. The context in this case, however, is somewhat different than in the ancient Narcissus myth, for the attraction is not obsessive, nor is it an unhealthy compulsion. The aspect of sexual attraction is present only in an indirect sense, for the sexual obsession Gray's character refers to in describing the child as a "lust flower" is in reference to the child's mother, with the infant placed as a "blossom" of that relationship.

*It's a Slippery Slope* presents one of the most lyrically beautiful moments contained in all of Gray's fifteen monologues. The moment also solidifies not only the resonance of the narrative with the Narcissus myth of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but also the achievement or culmination of the recurring issues with which Gray's self-reflexive monologues have always been concerned. Gray's persona describes a defining moment in the relationship between him and his son, when the man and the child bond in a fusion far stronger than, and different from, any fusion he had previously experienced. He says, "I look into his eyes, and it goes forever. He doesn't blink, he stares. No judgement. All the way through I fall in until I blink. I can't look anymore and we are together five hours." The eyes of the infant are representative of pools, and Gray's character merges with the image he sees reflected there. He then takes him outside where they spin on the lawn. "He is centrifugal," spinning out from his father's body, "and then, he reverses it and comes in and our hearts [touch] forever."
Throughout *It's a Slippery Slope*, Gray uses skiing as a metaphor for his persona's ever firmer handle on his own life. As he becomes more skilled at skiing, eventually overcoming his difficulty with "turning right," for example, he is at the same time moving toward a resolution of his personal ongoing dilemma of searching for the self. Gray's protagonist has met the challenge posited by Ovid as narrator of the Narcissus myth, who says Narcissus's image will go with him, "if you can go away." Gray's onstage character is indeed able to leave the prison of the pool, taking his son as a figurative self-image with him as he turns away from the reflected image of his own countenance. Leading the listener back, in a cyclical return to the opening comments of the monologue (reinforcing the geometrical structure of the monologue, Gray's protagonist tells of his "unconscious teacher" leading him down the mountain, the recurring objects of an obsessive attraction since his boyhood. He says that as his teacher philosophically comments about knowing the self is truly alive

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36 With the peripheral Echo figure in *It's a Slippery Slope* this time appearing as a split/dual identity of Renee and Kathy, the two women may be interpreted as another aspect of the Narcissus myth, that of Echo (the peripheral, always offering devotion) and Nemesis (who appears in the myth as a goddess who approves the righteous prayer" of those Narcissus had mocked. She causes Narcissus to be loved as he was loved by others: with no response returned.) In *It's a Slippery Slope*, Gray's persona refers to the understandable tension inherent in his "want[ing] two women in my life," and the opposition of the two women as equally attracting forces. Gray's protagonist says that the character of Renee outlines a condition: he may not see his son "until there is some kind of resolution." Gray's persona eventually separates from the character of Renee, with resulting ill will between the two women characters. According to Robert Graves in *The Greek Myths*, Nemesis is described as a goddess of vengeance (42), and as one of the Furies (63). In Ovid's Narcissus myth, Echo and Nemesis appear almost as counterparts, with Nemesis somewhat avenging Echo's ill treatment by causing Narcissus to love himself with no reciprocating response of devotion. This only increases Echo's sorrow, however, rather than relieving it.
when in the midst of a life-threatening/life-affirming dilemma, "[I realized] that I had just seen my future in him. That if I kept skiing I could be skiing at 75, with my son, if he wanted to learn." When he has descended the mountain, following his "unconscious teacher" he says: "[I] give myself a high five. And I think, you know, I've returned to New England. And I'm no longer a Puritan, if you define a Puritan as someone who is haunted by the idea that someone somewhere is always having a good time. Thank you for coming."

Clearly, It's a Slippery Slope represents a completion, another cyclical return to the complex issues of the self which Gray's persona has always portrayed in his monologues. As previously examined, the monologue Sex and Death to the Age 14 deals with Gray's onstage character's development of sexual identity and a "trying on" of different images in a search for a sense of self, actually relates back to an even earlier monologue. Sex and Death to the Age 14, published in 1986, reinforces several motifs explored in Gray's 47 Beds. This monologue, largely concerned with the protagonist's fear of death and the irony experienced on many levels throughout life, contains an especially striking reference to exactly the type of dilemma Gray

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[37] Columbus Dispatch writer Tim Feran wrote in a February 29, 1996 article concerning the geometric symbolism in It's a Slippery Slope that as Gray was approaching the age of 52 (the age at which his mother committed suicide) "he felt the circle coming around [and] it turned into a triangle, "speaking of Gray's involvement with another woman during his marriage to Renee. Feran also writes about the poignancy of Gray's father dying unaware that Gray had fathered a son: "And so, the man who had problems with closure completed the circle. He want back to New England . . . ."
continues to examine in all of his autobiography-based work. In describing his friend Arjuna, "a Kashmiri who grew up in England" and who thus "had a real problem with his color," Gray's character refers to him as "a living Greek myth. He was a real live walking Narcissus who only came alive when he was seen by other people" (101). Although the definition is distanced by its application to another character, we nevertheless gain significant insight into Gray's perception of a figurative Narcissus as one whose sense of self is determined by the image projected to and seen by others.

In It's a Slippery Slope, Gray's protagonist reveals that Kathy, her daughter Marissa, and their son Forrest live together and are bonded as a family through the experience of skiing as a unifying ritual. The protagonist says that, "just maybe, the family that skies together stays together," revealing his hopeful vision of establishing

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Gray's Sex and Death to the Age 14 addresses the trauma of normal adolescence, particularly the onset of puberty and the development of libido. D.W. Winnicott writes that the pre-adolescent years are difficult indeed. In Home is Where We Start From, Winnicott writes, "... then comes puberty, usually announced by a prepubertal phase in which a homosexual tendency may perhaps manifest itself. By the age of 14, the boy or girl who has not stepped over into puberty may be inherently and in health, thrown into a state of confusion and doubt ... . Let me emphasize that is not an illness when a mid-puberty boy or girl flounders" (24). Winnicott supports Gray's character's recounting of the sexually confusing adolescent phase, pointing out that it is a necessary stage. According to Winnicott, "... as they leave this stage, adolescent boys and girls are beginning to feel real, to have a sense of self and of being. This is health. From being comes doing, but there can be no do before be ... . (25).
a home and family. This attempt to create a sense of home, although with a somewhat different perception of home as metaphor for security, has been addressed as well in an earlier monologue, *Terrors of Pleasure: The House.*

In *Terrors of Pleasure: The House* the very title effectively communicates the ironic, conflicting desire of an individual to reconcile the urge to establish a home (especially as a means of establishing an adult persona) even while fearing commitment. In this monologue, Gray's protagonist purchases a cabin in upstate New York (after first working through whether or not he even wants such a commitment-loaded responsibility) and struggles with the various frustrations of home ownership and repair while attempting to pursue (and enhance) his performance career. With film easily identified as symbolic of the image-creating power of the gaze, Gray's persona struggles to reconcile the irresistible pull of acting, on the one hand, and solitude and home-ownership on the other.

Numerous references to issues of the self within the context of Narcissus myth-based imagery appear throughout the monologue: film as a metaphor for a

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*Terrors of Pleasure: The House* was also filmed in non-monologic form as an original HBO presentation. Here, all references to this particular work are to the piece as a published monologue, however. Though the essential motifs of dilemmas addressed in purchasing a home (and the repressed personal conflicts such a commitment can bring to the surface) remain the same, the filmed version, with its onscreen portrayal of representative characters and its on-location filming, significantly changes the perception of the work as an autobiography-based monologic narrative. In addition, some plot elements vary significantly in the filmed version vs. the written published edition.
reflecting pool (235), fear of commitment (223), the love of being seen (228),
rejection based on not having the right "look" (236), and the confusion between what
is real vs. what "looks" real (233).

The last reference mentioned above is particularly significant for it anticipates
the agonizing crisis Gray's protagonist tells us about in It's a Slippery Slope. In
Terrors of Pleasure: The House, Gray's character is auditioning for a film role in
which he would star opposite a beautiful soap opera actress named Sandy Struggles.
The producers have taken Gray's character through several levels of the audition
process, and he has been virtually promised the role, but they tell him they must see
him on tape, "to see if the camera loves [him]" (233). What occurs eerily predicts
It's a Slippery Slope:

Simon cried out, 'The camera loves you, I can tell already. But the
question is, do you love Sandy? I've got to capture that chemistry on
tape. You see, that's one of the problems. You're not acting like
you're really in love with her. You're holding back . . . .' I lied and
told him I did. If I told him the truth, I knew I wouldn't get the role.
The truth was that I felt no attraction to Sandy . . . . Also, the whole
idea of falling in love on camera was very confusing to me. Wasn't
acting like you were in love to a certain extent being in love? I mean,
I often act like I'm in love with Renee, so what's the difference? If I
act like I'm in love with Sandy won't that, in fact, put me there? (233)

Here, the protagonist has identified the essential question encountered by individuals
struggling with narcissistic issues, as Lasch has pointed out so many in our culture
are struggling indeed.

For Gray's character, auditioning for a role in a film, there is added
significance in the interpretation of film as a metaphor for the mirror reflection which
the pool of Narcissus provides. The theory of the gaze as described by psychoanalyst
Jacques Lacan specifically addresses the issue of the gaze in cinema. In *Staging the Gaze*, Barbara Freedman discusses Lacan’s theory of the gaze in terms of film, establishing a connection to Gray’s character’s struggle here, and throughout the monologues. Freedman writes:

Whereas Western narrative cinema is obsessed with the look, Western theatre is fascinated by the return of that look, what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan terms 'the gaze.' If the eye is that which sees, the gaze is that which elides the eye and shows us how we are caught out by our own look—displaced in the act of spectatorship. (1)

Gray’s persona is faced with the dilemma of not knowing what to do about "looking" like he is in love with Sandy Struggles the actress, who "looks" like she loves him.

In *Terrors of Pleasure: The House*, the question is left unanswered, and the audience is thus presented the same question: if I act like I'm in love with someone, won’t that, in fact, put me there?

As we have seen, *It’s a Slippery Slope* finds the character named Spalding Gray in a position where he must again examine the question of the self, in relationship with an other, particularly in terms of sexuality. *It’s a Slippery Slope* differs from previous monologues, which all relate in varying degrees to aspects of the same dilemma. The difference here is that this monologue finds the protagonist at a point in his life where he has discovered a type of answer, and the Tiresias figure of the "unconscious teacher" has helped him discover what he has perhaps known all along. It is in those moments when we confront our mortality and seek the self (not knowing whether we are having a good time or trying to kill ourselves) that we are most fully alive.
As a writer/performer whose works explore narcissistic dilemmas and issues related to cultural narcissism, Spalding Gray connects with audiences who, like his onstage character, struggle with similar situations. Spalding Gray's particular approach to monologic performance tends to increase an audiences's sense of identification with his performed persona: direct, personal, calm and likeable, Gray's performance mode is anything but distancing in its effect. The Narcissus mythology provides a framework which, mostly on subconscious levels, resonates with shared cultural experience.

Like Narcissus, Gray's onstage persona is obsessed with the reflection of the self: seeking it, desiring the image, distracted by it from the calls of the peripheral, figurative Echo. As Lawrence Thornton has written in Unbodied Hope: Narcissism and the Modern Novel:

. . . the point of contact between Narcissus's fantasy of himself and Tiresias's prediction is that the youth's self-image, once perceived, would become his own memento mori . . . . The mirror of the self at once lies and tells a truth the characters do not seek . . . . A curse shimmers on the surface of Narcissus's pool, for the cost of self-love is to lose the self as the narcissist stares through the counterfeit image into the void . . . . (10)40

40The phrase "into the void" carries special significance in its duplication of a conflict Gray discussed in the April 1995 interview. As he related events leading to the development of a new monologue, Gray stated that personal circumstances made it seemingly impossible at times to develop new work. He described it as having to "go out into the void." In It's a Slippery Slope, Gray's persona reveals that he has ultimately been able to find, successfully, a new way of working and after looking into the "void," he discovers that it was not a vast emptiness after all. By accepting the challenge of looking into the void, he was rewarded with the discovery of a new, unexpected reflection in the person of his son.
The metaphor of skiing enabled Spalding Gray's protagonist to free himself sufficiently from earlier fears (aging, responsibility and commitment, death, health problems, fatherhood) to be able to arrive at a new point in thinking. *It's a Slippery Slope* ends with Gray's persona expressing a much more optimistic view of his personal future than any of the previous monologues. The ability to ski, to play, has possibly provided the necessary therapeutic activity. In *Playing and Reality*, D. W. Winnicott writes of the need for play as necessary, both for children and adults:

"... in playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative" (52).41

In *It's a Slippery Slope*, Gray's protagonist indeed steps away from the pool, providing an answer to Ovid's question concerning whether or not he would be able to "go away." Whereas Narcissus remains a prisoner at the pool, obsessively desiring to possess the reflected image, Gray's self-reflexive onstage persona sees that the reflection is at once the self and an other. The "distant mirror" of his son enables him to escape the entrapment of the water, at once reflecting his self image and directing his gaze outward, toward life beyond the pool.

41Winnicott also address the concept of creativity as a means of coming to terms with one's individual identity in *Home is Where We Start From*. In this work, Winnicott emphasizes the fundamental search for a strong sense of identity as a universal desire, especially among, as he says, "people who feel intensely" (66). It is the same search Gray's protagonist has undertaken, able to move away from the surface of the water, even as Narcissus is not.
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Dissertations


Thomas Mann and Death in Venice

